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UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN  
Department of Social Anthropology

**A Retrospective Field Experience: A reflexive  
journey through day-to-day work with 'street  
children' at Street Universe**

A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
award of the degree of Masters in Arts in Practical Anthropology

**2002**

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Signed by candidate
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This work has not previously been submitted in whole or in part for the award of any degree, it is the candidate's own work and any substantial contributions to and quotations in the dissertation have been cited and referenced.

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## **Abstract:**

This thesis critically reviews thoughts and experiences that arose out of a nine-week internship and post-internship volunteer work at Street Universe, a local Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) working with 'street children' living in Cape Town's city centre and surrounds. It touches on two main topics, 'street children' and the NGO. Although I did not work exclusively with the 'street children', I interacted with them on a daily basis and therefore part of this thesis touches on issues pertaining to their lives. My main focus is the inner workings of an NGO and the context within which it strives to achieve its goals. I explore methodological and ethical aspects of doing fieldwork in an NGO setting, which coalesce with the problem of positionality, of situating myself as a researcher within webs of fluid interpersonal and professional relationships. Grounding my research in the day-to-day work of Street Universe allows me to identify how internal organisational matters affect the presentation and implementation of the organisation's aims. My aim is to link the two topics by showing how organisational matters are enacted in the relationship between 'street children' and Street Universe as a whole.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thank you to all the children and youth in the streets of Cape Town whom I interacted with, who directly or indirectly contributed to this study. Thank you in particular to those I created bonds with, for sharing the good and the not so good times.

A very special thanks to Ismael Naukosho for his constant motivation and support and for furthering my understanding of 'kombuis'<sup>1</sup> Afrikaans, to Chao Mulenga, for initially guiding me towards Street Universe and for constant reassurance, and to Nathalie Bucher and Shaun Cozett for generously making themselves available and being there helping me decipher my 'short circuited' mind.

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NOTE: Street Universe has kindly permitted me to identify the organization in this report. I also have this permission from all other named persons. The reader will note that other respondents are referred to by category and not by name in order to protect their identity.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Kitchen Afrikaans', a dialect spoken by the majority of Capetonians, and referred to as such.

## **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

### **Preamble**

Our uncooked 'facts' gathered so carefully in the field, are infected with the bacterial subjectivities of our own as well as our informants' particular biases. And our cooked descriptions, unlike other culinary concoctions, are even more likely to contain foreign particles if they jell into a pleasing whole. Reflexive anthropology, the latest treatment for our disease, seems to do little more than expose our wounds to light – a primitive cure that with more carnal injuries has had serious and even fatal consequences (Wolf, 1990:343).

Although reflexivity can be perceived as an “avoidance of unhappy issues” (that is, a disappointment with the situation of many of the people we study) (Sanjek, 1990:157), I prefer to think of reflexivity as the anthropology of our own anthropological processes. Reflexivity is encompassed in anthropology's more recent post-modern tradition as a way of giving more legitimacy to the mainstream traditions of social science (Marcus, 1998).

My research experience inspired me to make sense of my presence and influence (or its lack) in the field. Also, by realising how much of what we write as fieldnotes is not really objective but interpretative (Marcus, 1998), I am led to a better understanding of how anthropologists do fieldwork.

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Street Universe is a Cape Town based Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) - founded in November 1999 - that strives to create opportunities that will enable “hardened street children and youth” (Street Universe Business Plan, as per January 2002. See Appendix four) to take responsibility for becoming constructive citizens. The focus of Street Universe as outlined in the Business Plan is to provide alternatives to street life. This is done through a street intervention program, which encompasses a range of sporting and recreational activities through which the individuals' commitment to change is assessed.

Throughout my internship, the following activities were offered to the youth<sup>1</sup>: swimming, drumming, soccer, kayaking, surf-skiing, sailing and bee-keeping. In addition to these activities, “tented camps” (Street Universe Business Plan, 2001) were planned. The purpose of these camps was to take the street kids “away from the negative influences of street life” and into a temporary “natural, safe and friendly environment” to prepare them for self-sustainable living in a “Youth Development Village”. These camps were not organised regularly and the two camps I attended were spontaneous and not part of a designed structure.

The Street Universe operation in Cape Town is a pilot project being tested to find an adequate model to be used countrywide. However, in the organisation’s business plan, entitled “The Streetkids’ Solution!”, I found no definition of ‘street children’<sup>2</sup>, and no clear-cut boundaries regarding the target group of the organisation. The term ‘street kids’ was freely used to refer to the children and youth the organisation worked with; it was used by all staff at Street Universe, and I soon adopted it. I understood that Street Universe’s initial aim was to identify and understand the individual needs of the children and youth living on the streets of Cape Town and to identify the structures and processes that needed to be in place in order for them to realise their full potential. It was important that trust and respect be established with the estimated 400 “street people”<sup>3</sup> (Street Universe Business Plan) from the Cape Town CBD and surrounds with whom they had started interacting.

Here I juggle with two main topics, ‘street children’ (Chapter Three) and Street Universe (Chapter Four). Although I did not work exclusively with the ‘street children’, I interacted with them on a daily basis. Chapter Two touches on methodology and ethical concerns. I have not collected quantitative data on ‘street children’ nor was I particularly interested in demographic data about the children and youth I worked with. My main focus

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<sup>1</sup> The words ‘children’ and ‘youth’ were used on a daily basis by staff at Street Universe to refer to the individuals they worked with. I noticed that the word ‘children’ was used to refer specifically to the younger ones (up to mid-teens) while ‘youth’ often covered all individuals, children inclusive, up to the mid-twenties.

<sup>2</sup> Discussion on ‘street children’ terminology will follow. In the meantime, I put the phrase in inverted commas to highlight the unnatural construction of the term.

<sup>3</sup> It is estimated that there are 1000 ‘street children’ in Cape Town (Parker-Lewis, 2001), “strollers not included” (2001:16). Parker-Lewis defines ‘strollers’ as children who come to the city centre to beg during the day, who remain members of a family system and who do not follow the norms of a “street child subculture” (2001:16).

was to look into the inner workings of an NGO and the context within which it strives to achieve its goals. I have done so in order to demonstrate how the NGO's internal processes came to be reflected in its relationship with its target population, the 'street children'. My interest in children, childhood and youth grew as I developed an understanding of the individuals that Street Universe works with. I consciously chose not to direct my focus at the children and youth as I was aware of - and struggled to come to terms with - the fact that it would be a study of misery. Some of the stories I heard were so painful that after the first weeks I became hardened, almost desensitised, after so much distressing conversation. At times, the most difficult part of the research was the emotional impact of interacting with some of the children and not being able to do something, immediately, to alleviate their situation.

I first heard about Street Universe in September 2001, from a friend who had considered doing her research on the organisation and made initial contact with Linzi Thomas and Paddy Upton, then founder/director and managing director respectively of the organisation. I was advised to contact the organisation two months later because they were "undergoing a lot of changes". At the end of November I contacted Paddy Upton again, and because they were closing down for the Christmas holidays and at the same time preparing for a big event in early January, we agreed I would start the internship at Street Universe on the 14<sup>th</sup> of January 2002.

At the November meeting I asked Paddy for a brief and explained the context of the internship: that I was a Masters student in Practical Anthropology at the University of Cape Town, and that as part of the degree, I needed to do a six-week internship with a Non-Governmental Organisation leading to a minor dissertation, based on the report written for the internship (see Appendix six). I told him I knew very little about the organisation and he agreed to meet with me again and in the meantime he would think about a brief. The main aspects he emphasised concerning the internship were that firstly, my report and dissertation should be useful for the street kids in the long run, and not be "a piece of academic writing that would gather dust in some library on one of their shelves". Secondly, he would like me to look at the organisation from within because interns, volunteers and previous researchers were always sent to the streets to "work with the children" while little attention was paid to

detail within the organisation. He requested that I concentrate on organisational matters. In an e-mail of 18<sup>th</sup> December 2001 he noted that “research and evaluation of the work done is imperative for both the progress of the Cape Town model, and for replicating it in other centres countrywide” (see Appendix five, and e-mail that constitutes my internship brief. See Chapter 4).

I started as a full-time intern on 21<sup>st</sup> of January 2002, based at the outreach office (see below). After one week “hanging out” at the outreach office, and in terms of the brief and my conversations with Paddy, I had decided I wanted to understand organisational communication (information flows, follow-ups, feedback, etc.). I found Street Universe to be an interesting place to do an internship, as it did not conform to my perception of social development organisations. By this I mean that, to my surprise, there were no social workers, nor anybody employed with a social science background. The founder and director was a film production manager and line producer with a passionate concern for ‘street kids’ and the managing director was a sports commentator and former fitness trainer for the national cricket and rugby teams. Working in a social development context with people who have seemingly unrelated professional backgrounds was an unexpected encounter, apart from working with ‘street children’ being a whole new field for me. Although I had lived in Cape Town for five years, I had had no previous contact with the ‘street children’ beyond the usual begging generally encountered in the city.

### Staff Structure and Premises

At the time I started as intern, Street Universe’s permanent staff structure was as follows:

*Head office* (not working directly with the ‘street children’)

- founder and director
- managing director (MD)<sup>4</sup>
- administration and finance
- marketing co-ordinator

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<sup>4</sup> The same week that I started, Paddy resigned and Braam Malherbe came on board as MD, after one or two short-term MD candidates with whom I never established contact.

*Outreach office* (daily interaction with children and youth)

- outreach manager
- senior youth co-ordinator
- sports outreach co-ordinator
- 3 x outreach workers (former Cape Town street kids)

In addition to the formal staff when I started, there were five full-time foreign volunteers and two full-time foreign interns (including me). By my last week (as an intern) at Street Universe, we were three full-time volunteers and three full-time interns. The volunteers I encountered were all foreigners travelling for periods of between five and twelve months, gaining hands on experience of working with 'street children'. The interns I spoke to, were, like me, fulfilling part of a formal requirement for their studies. Street Universe informally recruited volunteers and interns, who were treated as one and the same. All were welcome, but none was assigned specific tasks or responsibilities (see Chapter Four), neither did they have to report to anyone at Street Universe.

Street Universe occupied two offices, a head office in Namaqua House, Burg Street (see small circle on map, Appendix two), next to Green Market Square and an outreach office at the corner of Bree Street and Shortmarket Street (see big circle on map, Appendix two) at the basement of a building belonging to the City Council's Housing Department. Since I had first made contact with Street Universe, that was the third location of the outreach office. At the very beginning of the organisation's existence, they were across the above-mentioned location in Bree Street. That was the first venue I got to know. In that venue, head office and outreach office operated under the same roof, in a two-storey house. The second time I went to see Paddy, both offices had temporarily moved to a very limited space in a small building nearby. A week before I started my internship, they had just gone through a big move, to Bree Street and Burg Street respectively (as mentioned above). In July 2002, after much resistance by City Council and neighbouring businesses, the outreach office was relocated to a spacious yet littered and abandoned venue in Pickwick Street, Salt River (see circle on map, Appendix three) which had previously housed a drop-in centre and skills training workshops for STREETS, a community development organisation. The venue had remained unoccupied and its facilities dysfunctional for just over a year since STREETS closed down.

This change of location was unfortunate in that many street kids lost interest in Street Universe. While in the CBD, they would hang out around the office or would come in several times during the day. In Salt River, the kids had to be picked up every day at 9am (sometimes more than one trip was needed) and dropped back in the city at 4pm. Many preferred to stay in town, as they would not be dependant on staff to drop them back on the street. Some of them told me it was a “big mistake” of Street Universe to move from the city centre, but few understood it was hardly a matter of choice.

Before my experience with Street Universe I had a misconception of the children and youngsters strolling in the streets of Cape Town. I saw them begging, ‘parking cars’ (that is, directing cars into parking areas) washing cars, being mischievous, or merely hanging around, in dirty clothes, sniffing glue or thinners. That was my impression of ‘street children’.

For practical purposes, I will use the term ‘street kids’<sup>5</sup> to refer to all the children and youth that form part of the Street Universe ‘clientele’ that is, the estimated 400 children and youngsters found on the streets of Cape Town that Street Universe has built relationships with since it started operating in 1999. According to Street Universe’s database, these ‘street kids’ are mostly males between the ages of five to thirty; however, most of those I encountered were between ten and twenty. I have not captured detailed data on those I interacted with and cannot with certainty give exact numbers (See Chapter Two for more on methodology and data collection). At this stage Street Universe does not have a valid database that captures the rich information that they absorb on a daily basis. An example of ‘personal details’ captured in the absurd current database<sup>6</sup> follows:

Culture:	coloured
Hobbies:	smoking buttons

In my eyes at first they seemed a rather homogenous group. In my five years of studying anthropology I had not come across one study, book or report on ‘street children’.

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting that Hecht (1998), who did extensive research on street children in Northeast Brazil, holds that the word ‘kids’ celebrates a spirit of rebelliousness. However, this has not dictated my choice of term, as I had adopted the term ‘street kids’ long before I read Hecht’s book.



I had no expectations, merely assumptions that I had taken with me into the field, because I do not believe that anyone arrives in the field naïve and free of bias. In fact, the day I officially started at Street Universe, the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 2001, our car was broken into outside our block of flats. Our very treasured tape recorder, given to us by a friend, had been stolen. On my first day at Street Universe, I was sent to accompany one of the youth workers to court, because one of ‘their’ youth were appearing. I asked what the case was about and he told me that the accused (26 years old) had broken into a liquor store with some friends, one of them a woman my age. And there I was, shaken by my own early morning break in, having reported to the police, and now finding myself sitting in a court room, waiting for one of ‘our’ youth to appear. That first day I went through a jet lag of emotions. I soon discovered that the assumptions I carried with me shielded me from the realities in the field. As I started understanding and engaging the dynamic reality of that day, involving marked differences in local contexts, my initial assumptions withered away and were soon replaced by another set of assumptions: assumptions which many if not all anthropologists subscribe to (Foster, 1969): I defensively searched for a logical explanation for the behaviour of the individuals that I was now learning to interact with.

Foster points out that a most important task for applied anthropology (as opposed to a conventional social anthropological investigation) is to “determine the premises underlying the behaviour both of the innovating organisation and of the group toward which its efforts are directed” (Foster, 1969:70). The “directed” recipient group in this case was the street kids (the objects of the Street Universe programs whose ultimate goal is to change aspects of their lives), and the “directing” innovating organisation being Street Universe (a deliberate and financed bureaucracy). My focal field of interest was the interaction setting where both “directed” and “directing” came into contact, usually setting in motion a series of processes.

I was fascinated by this new field and at the same time overwhelmed by the new experience. After a few days at the Street Universe outreach office, I realised the need to understand the inner workings of the organisation if I was to fit in and blend with the

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<sup>6</sup> Volunteers and interns have attempted to work on the database but it has proven to be a very difficult task without explicit interest and support from full time staff who know all the children and youth.

process. This sparked an interest in the importance of communication and organisational matters that I kept on questioning during the ‘fitting in’ process. The first indication that communication was not flowing clearly occurred when I enquired about Paddy, who had been my initial contact regarding the internship, because I needed to talk to him. I was first told by a staff member that he was on leave. I waited a week and asked somebody else at the office, and was told he was sick. That same day I was told by the same staff member that Paddy had been suspended, and a week later I read in a report to “staff, volunteers and friends of Street Universe” that Paddy had resigned. At the time I could not understand why, but later came to the understanding that he had resigned because of power conflicts and severe disagreements with Linzi, the founder and then director. At the outreach office, I often heard comments and ‘whispering’ about the problems of “the Linzis and Paddys”, but no feedback was given to volunteers and interns or even some staff members.

I explore my interest in this topic in Chapter Three. Because the internship at Street Universe was such a new, almost alienating, experience for me (as stated above), I was absorbing a lot of information and observations but not always digesting what I absorbed. I realised the real complexities of the field (see Chapter Two), in this case, my day-to-day experiences as an intern/anthropologist at the Street Universe outreach office and on the streets, and found myself constantly taking steps back in order to make sense of what I was perceiving.

Of all the themes and topics that tickled my curiosity for fieldwork, I decided to narrow them down for the thesis into two sections, which would later on determine the structure for this thesis. Firstly, based on the findings detailed in my report to the organisation, I will reflect on the realities of power relations and communication in Street Universe and how these impact on the work with street children. Secondly, I will consider and critique some thoughts on images of childhood, originally Western images, which underlie the dominant discourse around childhood in South African society, also prevalent in Street Universe. Based on these two themes, questions arise, questions which surely have been on many researchers’ and youth workers’ minds. If South Africa has accepted and signed the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child, thereby making a commitment to “give high priority to the rights of children, to their survival and to their

protection and development” (Paragraph 19 of the Declaration), why are we faced with increasing numbers of children taking to the streets for survival (Barnes-September et al. 2000)? How can we explain the hardness and cold of the streets being preferable to the hardship and misery of life at ‘home’? These, I am sure, are universal questions, that is, not specific to South Africa. These questions were unavoidably in my mind as a researcher working, albeit indirectly, with street children.

### Effectiveness – working towards a vision?

Several interventions have been put in place in the city of Cape Town in diverse attempts to reach out to the growing urban poor children and youth. Street Universe is but one of those interventions, the one I know. But people keep on asking me how effective the organisation has been in coping with or reducing the plight of disadvantaged children. Many people have asked: “This Street Universe thing, is it ... good ... or all talk?” Defining effectiveness in the context of innovative projects and programmes for street kids is a rather subjective task. Reaching an understanding of effectiveness stumbles into the inherent constraints of conducting a systematic evaluation and gathering conclusive supporting evidence. Blanc (in Leonardos, 1995) claims that the ideal situation would be one in which evaluation could demonstrate that more than a certain number of children and youth had changed to the desired behaviour, according to the set aims and targets. But Blanc was doubtful that change in behaviour could be attributable exclusively to a programme. Change in behaviour and attitude could, for example, be attributed to support and guidance from external programmes or individuals, or from other organisations, a church, etc.

During fieldwork I learnt that head office and outreach management clashed on their perceptions of effectiveness and success. Top management was more eager to count numbers of ‘success stories’ and numbers of children and youth dealt with throughout a year, while outreach management was more sensitive and tactful about the delicate nature of the children and youth, knowing that putting numbers to effectiveness could backfire with sponsors. My opinion was often sought on this matter and I was hesitant to take sides, but voiced my concern with putting numbers on paper, especially after witnessing certain

shortcomings in the organisation's road towards the vision. Frustrations often arose because not everything that was on paper worked in real life, and the vision seemed like a chimera never to be reached. Chapter Four deals with these discrepancies in more detail.

Another issue related to the concept of effectiveness of programs, concerns their capacity to deal with 'street children' in a feasible and significant way. Dewees and Klees (in Leonardos, 1995:18) refer to Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) as "jewel boxes, beautifully crafted efforts that really help some children but nevertheless do not even begin to address the magnitude of the problems NGOs are usually concerned with". In a Street Universe related interview with Bush Radio (28<sup>th</sup> of November 2002) I emphasised that Street Universe's focus was the quality and individuality of the work and not how many 'street kids' could be taken off the streets, which seemed to be the public's concern. During my time at Street Universe I encountered many members of the public who held a negative perception of organisations working with children and youth living on the streets. Many people I spoke to have become frustrated and embittered at the sight of more efforts to help the 'street children', while at the same time seeing new and younger faces every day on the streets of Cape Town.

I hope to take the reader through a journey which uncovers one of these beautifully crafted jewel boxes while at the same time sharing some thoughts on the complex reality of the lives of street children of Cape Town.

## **Chapter 2 - Methodological and Ethical Issues**

### **Gaining access**

While doing my internship at Street Universe, there were two groups of people I wanted to gain access to: the kids on the street and the staff at Street Universe, mainly the outreach staff. I was juggling my commitment between the two groups, and did not want to be seen as merely another 'friendly' travelling volunteer nor a researcher in the eyes of the kids and the staff. Jackson (in Sanjek, 1990:18) refers to this conflict in interest as a "two-hat problem". In my case I tried to make it clear to everybody (kids and Street Universe staff) who I was and what I was there for. It became apparent to me that no matter how often I tried to explain to some of the kids what I was there for, they did not understand and referred to me as another volunteer. The kids equated young foreigners working temporarily at Street Universe with volunteers. This general perception shaped my status as a 'volunteer'.

This is one of the two reasons why I initially struggled with my role. The second was that I did not want the staff to feel that they were being checked up on and cross-examined behind their backs. I decided from the outset to allow the kids and staff to establish contact with me on their own terms and in their own time. For example, some kids were very hard to approach so after a few attempts at having a conversation (e.g. "How are you today?" or "What did you do at the weekend?") I felt strongly that they did not want to be approached and left them alone. I found it also extremely challenging to attempt a conversation only to realise that their concentration spans were often reduced by drug dependencies (cf. Parker-Lewis, 2001). This partly contributed to my shift of focus with the kids after I came to realise that only some of them were ready and willing to interact and bond with me. On the other hand, some kids were very open and curious.

My approach, however, had some disadvantages, and I discovered that wanting to be first and foremost a friend to the kids was restricting at times. Furthermore, my status as 'friend', as well as my obviously privileged situation, occasionally resulted in the kids using me as a resource. They were also attempting to get or avoid my intervention in certain areas

of their lives. This obviously raised some important ethical issues, for example, I encountered situations where a crime had been committed but because confidentiality and neutrality had to be maintained, my ability to report or intervene was compromised. In general, however, I am certain that the level of trust and openness that was generated through my technique of gaining access to the kids was a positive factor that outweighed the disadvantages of this approach.

I maintained the same level of trust and openness with all staff. Unlike consultants who are asked to solve organisational problems (Gibson et al 1997), I brought my own questions and observed the staff's actions and interactions. Because I had invited myself to Street Universe, I approached staff in a way that minimised interference with their work and protected their privacy. I was open about my interest in power relationships and obstacles to communication and co-operation as a result of frustrating early experiences.

After meeting with the outreach manager for the first time, he mentioned his concerns about public reports on the organisation at a time when it was rebuilding. He raised questions about possible conflicts between my interests and the organisation's. I referred to the brief and my conversations with the managing director, only to discover that he had forgotten to inform them about my arrival. I described my academic interests and my willingness to share my final product with them and explained that I was not out to jeopardise the organisation.

One staff member was initially hesitant to talk and expressed fear in discussing certain matters with me. He had first associated me with some authority from inside the organisation, only my constant reminders that I was an academic reassured him and later, as we grew closer, he openly shared his critical thoughts on organisational policies.

### Data collection

The manner in which access to the people I worked with (kids and staff) was gained, as well as their physical environment and way of life, were the determining factors in deciding how the information would be collected and recorded in practice. The unstructured

quality and flexibility of most anthropological research (Foster, 1969) strikingly contrasts with the research of other social sciences. The more conventional social science method of interviewing according to a rigid schedule of questions (Bernard, 1994) would have been completely inappropriate in this case. I identified the challenge in anthropological fieldwork as uncovering the border that straddles the sciences and the humanities (Johnson, A and Johnson, O. in Sanjek, 1990). Sanjek (1990) metaphorically illustrates this challenge to join the two:

(...) like oil and water the two do not mix well: every step toward scientific reliability seems (...) to be a step away from humanistic intimacy, and the achievement of many-layered humanistic interpretation seems possible only at the expense of scientific precision (...) (Sanjek, 1990:161).

I decided that the use of a dictaphone would also be detrimental to the 'naturalness' of the relationship I had established. Having initiated contact with the people on their terms, I decided to maintain this approach throughout the research. This thesis is thus based primarily on observed data, and supplemented with data obtained from very loosely structured interviews conducted in the form of normal conversations. I never recorded during conversations, but wrote detailed notes as soon as possible after conversations had taken place. I do acknowledge though that this technique was problematic in some areas: precision and details in the data had to be sacrificed in the interests of maintaining the relationships established. Assessing staff and policies was taxing, due to the fact that building relations was so sensitive and time-consuming - in particular with the kids, as they would not want to talk on certain days, or would disappear and not come to the office for days or weeks. It became very clear that this kind of research requires immersion over a longer period than I had available.

Methodological and ethical issues working in an NGO setting posed a distinctive set of data-gathering complications, which Gusterson (in Markowitz, 1997: 42) aptly sums up: "Participant observation is a research technique that does not travel well up the social structure". The nature of participant observation requires that one gains access to settings and situations which one would not otherwise have access to as a member of the general public. The main complication was that I witnessed how so much of the interactions

between key role-players took place over the phone or in closed meetings. I resolved this – but of course only partially - by informally socialising with staff, which allowed me to get acquainted with their positions and perspectives.

Much of my time was spent just hanging around the office, sometimes participating in some of the programmes (bee-keeping, swimming or drumming), or joining staff in their daily activities, for example, going to court, visiting someone in hospital or in a shelter, etc. This was the best way of getting acquainted with the kids and staff, that is, by actively participating in and being part of a routine and engaging in conversations as opposed to, for example, taking them aside for an interview. In retrospect, I believe that the open and flexible manner in which I initiated contact, allowed me the space to alter my specific techniques of gathering data in accordance with the changing conditions and situations I found.

My main research strategy was therefore to spend time with people who came to the outreach office (staff and kids) on a frequent, if irregular basis for a period of nine weeks. Hanging out helps build trust, and trust results in ordinary conversation and ordinary behaviour in one's presence (Bernard, 1994). The duration of the daily interaction depended largely on the mood and activities of the individuals themselves. At times some conversations were only a few minutes, but on occasions have lasted up to a few hours. At the end of each day, I made detailed notes, consolidating what I had learned in written form. Sanjek's (1990:15) statement that "anthropologists are those who write things down at the end of the day" sums up how I was perceived by the Street Universe staff I worked closely with and I realised that indeed, doing fieldwork happens when you expose yourself to the judgement of others (Sanjek, 1990).

#### Ethical issues: the street kids

From the outset of the research process, I realised that in working with a group of people whose legal position is clearly far from secure, I would be faced with a number of ethical issues that would necessarily affect both my methodology in the field and the presentation of my thesis. During the internship I regularly found myself having to deal



with and answer a whole range of ethical questions as they arose. The individual incidents that arose could invariably be reduced to one of two main ethical questions. The first related to my role and the effect I had on certain kids in certain situations. At times I felt an impulsive urge to intervene in a situation and sometimes I was asked to do so by others. In some of these cases I chose to intervene, while in others I felt that it would be a more ethical decision to refrain from acting on personal impulse. I found myself often waiting for approval from outreach staff before intervening or taking action. They seemed able to master the art of evaluating situations that for me seemed highly sensitive. For example, one day a nineteen year old youngster whom I knew relatively well came running into the office (a day when we were three volunteers and two youth workers alone at the office), right into my arms. He was crying and inconsolable. He told us that he had been raped by his best friend, while under the influence of alcohol and asleep. We phoned the outreach manager (who was in a meeting) and after assessing the situation, he called the police, and charges were laid against the friend. The next day, when I came into the office, I was told that it turned out that he was the one who had attempted to rape his friend while asleep, and when the friend had awoken, he had been so shocked and angry and threatened him with a broken bottle, and that is why, fear-ridden, he had run away. I was utterly puzzled, and could not help but believe the original version. It felt as though one never quite knew what to believe.

Another specific incident caused tension between outreach staff and staff from another organisation because a volunteer and I had confronted a situation, judging that appropriate from a kid's narration of an event. An eleven year old boy had stormed into the office, crying, saying that his little brother (a six-year-old) was being taken away to a shelter after having been found on the street. He said that if his little brother did not go home with him (they were 'strollers', kids who often come to the city centre during the day to beg and return home) his parents would blame him for not having been responsible. He begged us to do something urgently before his brother was taken away to some shelter that he did not know of. We went to the other organisation with the boy, and found a big commotion, and in the midst of all, a little boy being pulled from one side to the other. We realised that matters were under control and left, after being assured that the boy was taken to a legitimate shelter, after he had been seen on the streets repeatedly under "damaging circumstances" (as described to us). The next day we were warned by the outreach manager

about that kind of manipulation by the kids and were told the most gruesome story about how the older brother sold the younger one for sexual services for older men. That afternoon, the boy had made arrangements with a 'client' and had now found that he could not 'access' the brother, because of the intervention from the other organisation. The point to stress is that a generalisable ethical position on whether to intervene or not is difficult to establish. The specific circumstances of each incident determined my actions. The kids often played mind games and manipulated staff members' feelings in order to get attention and support. Schärf et al (1986) argue that manipulation is a survival skill of considerable importance for 'street children'. I often had to follow my instincts in order to determine the urgency and seriousness of a situation, and the need to intervene or stay away and could but hope I had made correct decisions.

The second ethical question related to the potential danger to the kids of certain facts about them being made public. What was I to do with the findings of the research? What could I include and what had to be excluded in order to cause the least harm to the kids? These questions were on my mind daily. This has more bearing on the presentation of the thesis than on the practices in the field during the internship at Street Universe.

I was worried about becoming part of the industry of researchers that treat street children as a sort of raw material, there for the taking, and of translating the anguish of real children into a thesis that would benefit above all myself. This was clearly a concern for Street Universe as well, as I was sometimes indirectly questioned about my research and thus felt unspoken criticism about its outcome. I find it absurd to suggest that I am writing for an audience of street children – I met few that read fluently. I find it conflictual, to translate the everyday fears and frustrations of Cape Town's street children into academic jargon. I also asked myself self-critical questions, such as whether my research would bring enrichment to the people I was studying. No matter how sensitive my techniques, I knew it would not be an enriching experience for the street kids. I felt my critical observations and input would be more valuable for Street Universe as I could feed back my research findings into the organisation. It is partly for these reasons that I opted to look at the NGO and its staff, rather than become a temporary academic bystander in the world of the kids.

I was at times exposed to incidents, facts and situations that were of a particularly sensitive nature. Some of the activities that the kids participate in are illegal and so I constantly asked myself, what is my responsibility as participant observer in such situations? Some of this material is clearly of relevance to the thesis; however, it could also be a source of danger to certain individuals were I to document all details. In the text that follows and in my research notes, I have done my best to ensure that there is no detailed information that could harm any of the individuals or groups with whom I made contact during my internship/voluntary work at Street Universe.

#### Ethical issues: Street Universe, the organisation

From the outset I was open about my research and intentions with the organisation. In the first few weeks it was difficult to establish a clear understanding about the exact nature of the internship because the staff a) perceived me as another volunteer and b) did not know what the discipline of anthropology entailed. I wanted them to know that I was not there to judge the quality of their performance, whether social or financial, but that I was rather interested in the systems in place that governed the quality of their performance. It was only after staying on as a part-time volunteer after the end of the formal internship that the outreach manager understood anthropologists' knowledge and skills in interpreting socio-cultural systems and started putting it to use, by, for example discussing the state of certain programmes or future projects with me, asking me to draft proposals, compile reports, etc.

During the internship I often felt like a spy, and often puzzled people when I asked a lot of questions or simply had an opinion, since I was perceived by most as a volunteer and volunteers were known to conform. One day I was sent to court, and I did not want to go because I had been there a few times not knowing what was going on, because everything was dealt with in Afrikaans. A member of staff said:

It's ok to say no. Many volunteers go around doing things just for the sake of doing something even if they don't want to. They think that because they are volunteers they can't say no and at the end of the day they are unhappy and frustrated. You know, I actually don't blame them, they don't know what's going on, nobody tells you people. This office is chaos and nobody knows what's going on.

On my first day at the outreach office, when speaking to the music co-ordinator, he told me: "And please, do ask questions. If there is anything you need to know, just ask!" and then in a softer tone he added: "Because that is the problem with all you volunteers, you never ask anything!" I smiled and told him not to worry, because I had come with a bag of questions ready for unloading. I had introduced myself to everyone as an intern from UCT and had explained what anthropology is about. One of the youth workers asked me: "So tell me, who were the first inhabitants in South Africa? Yeah, you must know, that is what you study..." I sometimes felt my attempts to bring across what the discipline of anthropology entails were in vain. Nobody at the outreach office had heard about anthropology. They were mostly used to social work interns and even if I tried to make the distinction clear, I felt that there was not any particular interest in distinguishing between the two fields. One thing is certain: after having me around for eleven months at least one thing has been ingrained in most of the staff members about anthropologists: they ask a lot of questions. It was also interesting to note that the outreach manager, after referring to me as having become "furniture", started to frequently approach me in connection with a particular topic, asking: "And what does the anthropologist think?" This was a clear sign that my advice was sought and valued.

Making the inner workings of Street Universe more visible, positioning myself as a private measuring instrument and "invisible 'expert'" (Pels in Strathern 2000:142) was at times an uncomfortable task, mainly because of the nature of anthropological research: a) we study people by literally 'spying' on them ("Anthropologists have always been forced to maintain the secret that, in the end, they can never be trusted by anyone" (Pels in Strathern 2000:164). For example, we will genuinely and actively partake in events, for example, a funeral, but those around us will never know that we are most likely to go home and frantically jot down the lived and observed experience, because that is the nature of our research). However much we would want to participate, and do, we are really there to

observe (Bernard, 1994). Nonetheless, the extent to which one becomes a participant has as much to do with perceiving oneself as a participant.

Strathern (2000) argues that a) we as anthropologists can never find an audience to which we can show our 'true' face, but that "impression management will be the only way to continue our existence as ethnographers" (2000:164); and b) research in the social sciences can legitimately be critical of organisations and this can create tensions in the workplace. By means of assigning myself my own *modus operandi*, I constructed the environment in which I was operating, making it more 'auditable' (Pels in Strathern, 2000). In this context I faced two challenges: firstly, trying to define initially not clearly circumscribed sources of data, and secondly, I had to isolate myself from the power dynamics in which I was operating. However, at times I went beyond the 'political'. While generally avoiding taking sides when conflicts arose, I did not hesitate to point out critical matters – a kind of honesty that I truly believe has nothing to do with research ethics.

The American Anthropological Association (AAA) has confronted the issues of ethical conduct when anthropologists participate in organisations to engage in organisational development and change (Gibson et al, 1997). As scientists, anthropologists "pledge through their training and socialisation to engage in value-free, publicly reported research and activities with allegiance to no power or vested interest" (Gibson et al 1997:471). I have tried to be constant to the association's stipulations to ensure that no information presented in this thesis harms any individual in the organisation or the organisation as a whole.

### **Chapter 3 – Reflections on Disparate Realities of Childhood**

[street children] force us to re-examine our notions about family and society, welfare institutions, education and human rights. But most of all they force us to reflect on our notions of childhood (Swart, 1990:126).

This chapter explores the complexity of street kids' individual circumstances and the importance of recognising and respecting individual agency. Furthermore it deals with the inadequacy of applying romanticised universalistic notions of childhood to studies of 'street children', which however, are useful in understanding the thinking behind policy and programme design.

#### **Needs and rights of children**

Ideal notions of childhood are disseminated through the media and literature. It is through these images that we, and society in general, construct childhood. Childhood becomes a neat, almost purified, separate space from adulthood and we are led to believe that if children are controlled by adults, they can contain their 'innocence'.

The concept of childhood is culturally and historically determined (Boyden, 1990; Stephens, 1995). Reflecting on my experience at Street Universe, I ask myself: can Western accounts of childhood embodied in the Principles of the Declaration and the Convention on the Rights of the Child be considered feasible amidst the realities faced by 'street children'? In a 'street child's' immediate environment resources are so scarce and conditions so poor that to talk of the rights of children may become a mockery. Indeed this was the sentiment shared by colleagues at Street Universe.

The rights of children found their earliest expression in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child of 1959 (Stephens, 1995; Boyden et al, 1998). These rights petitioned that the basic needs of all children should be met. However the Declaration was concerned with very generalised principles or moral entitlements that did not extend to rights empowering children. The Declaration therefore did not have the power to alter the social or legal position of children in relation to adults. In 1989 The United Nations adopted

rights. The newer United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>7</sup>, underlined by the recognition of a child's personhood, recognises the significance of liberty and equality as rights essential to the preservation of a child's integrity as an individual (Boyden, 1990). Despite this, the question remains whether the application of Western versions of childhood (an ideal of childhood as a privileged phase of life properly dedicated to play and schooling during which economic activities are discouraged or denied) embodied in can be considered feasible amidst the disparate realities of childhood faced by children living in the streets. The principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, are heavily influenced by industrialised countries' concepts and experiences. It is therefore difficult to monitor the situation of 'street children' in relation to the provisions of the Convention. Attempts to enforce the rights of children who live in an environment where local laws and prerogatives challenge any preconceived ideas of childhood may be futile.

#### Perceptions of 'street children' in Cape Town

It is important to overcome the generalised notion that 'street children' are merely a group of victimised children. The children we see begging in the streets of Cape Town, who sometimes touch our hearts and bring out the deepest compassion in us (Schärf et al 1986) and yet in the eyes of many contribute to social chaos and decline, are neither "little angels" nor "little devils" (Warner, 1994). According to Swart (1990) whether 'street children' are perceived as "waifs in need of care and guidance", or "pests defiling the environment" (1990:46), people feel free to abuse 'street children'. Both mindsets - even though contradictory - the former too 'credulous', the latter too 'condemning', are commonly held ideas that reflect societal failure to gain an understanding of these kids' particular circumstances. The exploitation of younger children by gangs has created a situation where 'street children' are increasingly being associated with crime. Children and youth living on the street are perceived to fall outside an 'appropriate' social structure within which children are seen to belong. It would be useful to do further research around this topic concerning representation to test whether it is due to these premises that society fails to tackle the issue of 'street children' with beneficial long lasting results. Anthropology is a suitable discipline

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<sup>7</sup> See [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)

from which to begin questioning the workings and effects of these relevant concepts and practices (Clifford, 1988, Malkki, 1993).

While some 'street children' [in the world] do pose a threat to public safety, the popular discourse on urban violence casts them as gangs of potential malefactors (Scheper-Hughes, 1998). The concern with the 'discomfort' of business clients culminated in the City Council relocating the outreach office to Salt River, challenging Street Universe's marketing objectives, namely "to improve the community's perception of street kids"<sup>8</sup> and to convey a message counteractive to that of them being destitute and without hope, emphasising what they could achieve if given the right structure and opportunities. The relocation contributed to defeating the purpose of day-to-day street intervention, which was seen as a key aspect in the process of building a 'right structure' for the street kids.

The concept 'street children', when unpacked, does not represent a homogeneous group of problem children. It represents a dynamic group of individuals with voice and agency to shape their lives, individuals who have the power to influence the way we see society. Each kid tells a different story. Trust and long term immersion in the field is imperative to adequately shed light on the complexity and variability of the lives of street children which challenge universal notions of 'family', 'childhood' and 'home'. A twelve year-old boy told me that "sometimes, we go out and beg for food. This is our way of looking after one another". That lingered in my mind for a long time, trying to capture the meaning of 'looking after one another' so engrained in street life, in contradiction to my preconceived idea of children having to fend exclusively for themselves to survive on the street. I often saw how food was shared, for example, how a group of six shared a small packet of chips and half a litre of milk. I witnessed a new dimension to the concept of sharing.

In the field I had lengthy conversations which also added new dimensions to concepts of fear and pain. The presence of increasing numbers of children and youth in the streets of Cape Town is undoubtedly a reflection of a system that has failed to look after them. These individuals have desires, opinions and thoughts which shape their social world.

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<sup>8</sup> From Street Universe Business Plan.



It has been a unique challenge for me to try and understand the social world as 'street children' do, and to grasp how local and global 'childhoods' interface - keeping in mind that childhood is a social (and cultural) construction (Stephens, 1995; Scheper-Hughes, 1998). I feel I am not in a position to write extensively about the social worlds of the 'street children' I encountered, as it would be a one-sided and narrow expression of their realities that would not come close to describing their circumstances as experienced by them. I fear any attempt at re-presenting their life may contribute to a romanticised view of 'street children'. An ironic situation would arise if I were to ignore my own contribution to the construction of 'street children'.

While it is impossible to estimate exactly the number of 'street children' in any given city or country, it has been estimated that in Cape Town there are at the very least 1000 (Parker-Lewis, 2001). In view of the present difficult socio-economic situation in the Western Cape, there is every reason to believe that the number of children adopting street life will increase. Their numbers will probably rise as family structures more and more suffer the strains of increasing poverty and joblessness (Barnes-September et al, 2000). One twelve-year-old boy drew these difficulties to my attention as he spoke to me at length about emotional pain, related to rape by gangsters, an alcoholic father and the effect of drugs on his friends. A continuation of township and Cape Flats<sup>9</sup> violence and disruption, such as reported in daily news in recent years, will also contribute to the increase in the number of children and youth migrating to the city of lights – Cape Town.

The magnitude of the 'street child problem' (as we hear it being labelled these days) has led to an increasing concern for the plight of these children as well as to various attempts to combat the problem. However, social problems are not easily solved. On the one hand, local experts (NGOs, social workers, Welfare Department, researchers, etc) who meet under umbrella efforts such as the New City Partnership and the Street People's Project hold different if not contradictory views<sup>10</sup> regarding the combating of the 'street child problem'. On the other hand, the authorities (Department of Justice, Department of Correctional Services, South African Police Services (SAPS), magistrates, media, business owners) are

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<sup>9</sup> A scarred and industrial string of 'coloured' settlements and townships making up eastern metropolitan Cape Town. Gang warfare is rife and unemployment is the norm, not the exception (Kinnes, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Informal conversations with outreach manager at Street Universe (2002).

faced with the very difficult task of significantly reducing the numbers of street kids, which often leads to a catch-22 situation. They are handicapped by the problem of restricted funds, limited facilities and increasing complaints from the public, conditions which have mirrored frustrating circumstances and unfulfilled wishes for Street Universe. Yet, they are also constantly faced with trying to get to the root of the problem and preventing the phenomenon, which often leads to them facing a brick wall. This is not particular to Cape Town, but generally related where this 'growing urban tragedy' occurs (Agnelli, 1986; Swart, 1990; Leonardos, 1995).

In such circumstances, it is common for organisations to respond to the overwhelming problem with feelings of impotence (Gibson et al 1997). The apparent enormity of Street Universe's task often resulted in feelings of hopelessness which paralysed the daily work of the organisation. Some staff expressed these feelings openly by becoming particularly resigned and despairing in dealing with cases where they were forced to witness the ongoing abuse of a child without being able to mobilise the necessary resources to remove the child from a particular situation. Working in such a context at times proved to be highly stressful for the staff. It furthermore had the effect of obscuring the organisation's vision and interfering with the positive aspects of the outreach work, such as street intervention, assessment, and camp follow-ups which Street Universe considers instrumental and significant for tackling the phenomenon of 'street children' in Cape Town. Added to such unfavourable and challenging work conditions, Street Universe has had to deal diplomatically with the commercial sector in the Cape Town CBD area, which has taken a strong stand against street children as undesirable, advocating that they be removed altogether from the city centre. During my internship I encountered two isolated cases of youngsters addressing complaints to Street Universe in relation to overnight detention by city police for 'loitering' in the city centre. The detention slip read: "You are being detained by the following reason – loitering". 'Street children' are said to be bad for business in that they defy the "segregated order of the modern city" (Scheper-Hughes, 1998:382).

## The process of becoming a 'street child'

While the phrases 'street child' and 'street kid' are generally similar, some people point out the difference between children *on* and children *of* the street (Glauser, 1990). Richter (1988) for example explains this difference as follows:

By 'children of the street' [we] refer to homeless children who live on the street. It is this condition, I believe, we all mean to indicate when we refer to 'street children' in South Africa. On the other hand, 'children on the street' refers to children who go into urban areas in order to earn or to beg money and who then return home. These children contribute all or most of their earnings to their families. Importantly, 'children on the street' are attached to, and integrally involved with, their families (Richter, 1988:7).

Glauser (1990) points out that many assumptions are contained in the differentiation between 'children of the street' and 'children on the street', for example assumptions about 'the family', 'the child' and 'the home'. Glauser (1990) emphasises the importance of unpacking these assumptions, as that would help overcome conceptual problems in research, as well as – equally, if not more importantly – reducing ambiguities and unfounded generalisations in policies and the activities of various welfare agencies. He raises a point I think important when doing research with 'street children', namely, that many children live in similar conditions to those of a 'street child' but are not categorised in the same way nor do they receive the same amount of attention. Although in accordance with national child care policy a street child is treated as any child in need of care (Schurink, 1993), Glauser's theory is that less concern is shown by the public and the media as long as a child does not threaten the neat urban landscape. I found this unpacking of the concept of 'street children' useful as Glauser illustrates how the concept is played at the level of society, influencing the way children living in the streets are represented. Understanding how individuals are confined to constructed social categories, such as 'refugees' and 'street children', reveals how "technologies of power" (Malkki, 1992:498) shape their representation which then translate into standardised practices. People act upon constructed representations, which shape the way the 'street kids' are perceived, namely, as a "cosmopolitan impurity". Malkki (1992) uses this expression to make sense of how Rwandan refugees are perceived and it seems to apply equally to 'street kids'.

Another international NGO, Save the Children, defines a 'street child' as "a minor without a permanent home or adequate protection. They live in extreme poverty. They are homeless. Survival on the street, both day and night, is the only option open to them" (UNESCO, 1995:287). Parker-Lewis (2001:17) defines a 'street child' as "someone under 18, who has decided to leave home to care for himself on the streets, unassisted by an adult. (...) They give up any form of adult control, care and supervision and make it on their own".

These definitions are too narrow for the reality I found during fieldwork and do not cover all the individuals that permeate the definitions. After completing the internship at Street Universe, and having chosen to stay on as a part-time volunteer, I understand a Cape Town 'street kid' to be a male or a female up to the age of 30, who left his/her previous environment part time or permanently and who spends most of his/her time unsupervised on the street as part of a subculture of children who live an unprotected communal life and who depend on themselves and each other for the provision of physical and emotional needs such as food, clothing, nurturing, direction and socialisation. This is my broad understanding, based on my experiences and not a definition per se. As a definition it would be problematic, partly because social reality is so fluid and porous that an individual continuously falls in and out of categories and definitions, and partly because of the age group it encompasses.

The first day I came to the office, I asked Noel, the senior youth co-ordinator what age groups they worked with at Street Universe. He told me that the 'kids' are mostly between six and twenty-six, but that they get older ones as well. Indeed, he added that that same day a 45-year old man had come in to ask for help, and that he was as much a kid as younger people because "people like him need the same kind of support, care and guidance that a child does". Noel added that Street Universe did not have an exclusive age restriction. It was surprising for me to hear him talking like that about the older tattoo-ridden 'kids', whom I perceived as gangsters<sup>11</sup> more than 'kids' but I could understand what he meant. However, a week later I heard him expressing his frustration with some of the older people

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<sup>11</sup> In order to understand the relationship between street gangs in Cape Town and 'street children' as individuals it is necessary to have some knowledge of the formation and activities of Cape Town's extensive street-prison-gang networks. In *The Brotherhoods* (1984) Pinnock provides useful insights that facilitate that understanding.

who came into the office all the time, demanding things from Street Universe. He said that Street Universe ended up being so caught up with the older kids' "nonsense and spoilt behaviour", that they ended up not having time for the young ones, who Street Universe should really provide for. Other staff members agreed with him and one youth worker noted that some of the older kids 'claim' the young ones who 'work' for them (that is, collect money for them), but do not always share the money from their effort with the kids. This was the reason for Noel not wanting to have anything to do with the older ones. He voiced his concern about them still coming to the office, pretending they are "good" and taking care of the youngsters, and some staff members "falling for it" and "wasting time" with them.

Many older 'kids', I was told, have homes and families in Cape Flats areas such as Mitchells' Plain, Elsies River, Valhalla Park, Lotus River and Manenberg amongst other places. They commit crimes, go to Pollsmoor prison and come to the streets instead of going back to their original areas, because they have things to patch up (debts, fear and anger, rival gangsters' revenge, etc.) and going back home after prison can be a risky business. In such instances many they choose to withdraw from the home environment and adopt a communal lifestyle on the street that provides some protection from potential danger and at the same time they get caught in a contagious crime environment where survival of the fittest is what counts. These youngsters, together with younger people who escape from extremely poverty ridden homes (in previously disadvantaged areas) where alcoholism and domestic violence are the order of the day, constitute the 'street kids' that have adopted the streets of Cape Town.

Despite the fact that these children and youth share the common factor of street life, there can be a world of difference between the characteristics of each individual. Many 'street children' are well aware of categories and definitions, which they conveniently fall into, adopt as an identity, and negotiate. For example, a group of 'street children' were invited to attend a parliamentary session by the Ministry of Sport and the Department of Home Affairs<sup>12</sup>. One of the group, Wiseman, told me about that day he and another five

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<sup>12</sup> The Department of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Sport worked together to enable one of the youth that Street Universe works closely with to go to the Laureus Sports Awards in Monte Carlo. The Laureus Foundation is a charitable venture in partnership with the World Sports Academy, that funds and promotes the use of sports as a tool for social change. Street Universe was chosen as one of the 10 beneficiaries around the world for 2002 and it was in connection with this that two members of staff and a street child 'ambassador'

boys went to parliament. He reported generalisations that were made about street children, for example, they were pitied for not having had the opportunity to go to school, whilst he had in fact been to school up to Grade 5 and he knew how to read and write. Laughing out loud he said: "Imagine if I had told them there, excuse me Sir, I have been to school. Imagine their faces. You see, I couldn't do that there. I don't know what they think of us, these people". He spoke about the parliament with a certain air of mockery, and laughed as he was telling me about the other boys who were falling asleep, and he had to keep on tapping their shoulders to keep them up straight.

### Day-to-day survival on the street

'Street children's' survival on the street mostly depends on their age and their status as newcomer or streetwise child. Newcomers and younger children generally have a harder time to survive. Survival often means moving from one place to another. Many children mention money as the most important reason for staying on the street. A child could earn between R20 and R40 per day<sup>13</sup> in the streets of Cape Town by begging, stealing and parking cars. It is unlikely that every child actually earns that but it is the possibility that keeps them there. Making a life for oneself on the street means becoming part of a subculture with a specific image and slang as well as with certain rules. For experienced Street Universe staff it was easy to identify a young child who was new on the street. They carried themselves differently, and after three to four weeks on the street they adopted a brash and impudent attitude towards staff. Parker Lewis (2001:40), who has worked in a 'street children' shelter in Cape Town, coined the phrase 'niemand sê vir my nie'<sup>14</sup> to describe the attitude, which she too often encountered. Schärf et al (1986:263) identifies this behaviour as a "trend towards individualism". By the third or fourth week the children identify strongly with and respond to a particular peer group of kids. Older leaders protect younger ones and befriend newcomers in exchange for money and services (Schärf et al. 1986), thus 'inviting' them to their circle.

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were invited to the Awards ceremony in Monte Carlo. Wiseman, an 18-year-old, was chosen to go, by Street Universe, on the basis of his positive attitude and constant commitment to the sports programmes.

<sup>13</sup> Information obtained from informal conversations with children and youth.

<sup>14</sup> Afrikaans, and translates into 'no one tells me what to do'.

The street life subculture has certain characteristics such as sniffing glue and thinners, assigning territories in which particular children may and may not work, begging, eating and sleeping together, helping each other when in trouble (mutual support networks), etc. This subculture may very well be designated criminal by society at large, however it is shaped by essential survival strategies on the street (Boyden, 1990). Some kids expressed to me that belonging is a very important aspect of this subculture and that it is largely determined by loyalty to the group. Within their groups, the street kids may feel they fulfil a unique role and that they are needed in that role, while they have come from an environment where they felt not they were now wanted or needed. We might perceive the street environment as the worst place for a child, but on the streets the child finds other children in the same situation, with similar experiences, who can relate to each other and thus close bonds are created.

#### *One example of an unwelcoming home environment*

One day, we (a youth worker and I) decided we wanted to conduct a home visit with one of the kids. It had been one of the aims of two particular three-day camps to take ten boys for home visits two weeks after the camp, as part of outreach's 'transformation process'. 'Transformation' entails facilitating, understanding and establishing relationships with the kids' immediate environment as well as getting acquainted with the family situation. We were very curious as to what home environment a particular fifteen-year-old boy had come from as nobody knew much about him. He was difficult to approach and it was difficult to communicate with him. Off we went with another volunteer and Noel, to find the boy's house in Site B, Khayelitsha (see map in Appendix one), following the boys directions. When we arrived, many people, curious about our presence there suddenly surrounded the car. The boy, who was sitting between me and another volunteer in the back seat of the car, hid his face under his jacket, yet was curious to see the people around the car, and smiled to some of the children he saw. Next to his mother's house, there was a shebeen. Three men, clearly under the influence of alcohol, were very vocal and insulted the boy. One of them attempted to slap him several times and kept on saying: "I know this fucking child. I know him. His mother is not here, but if she sees him. That is his house. This fucking child!" The house, which was a small one roomed shack, stood open, and someone from the crowd went to look for the mother but could not find her. The people, especially the men, were hostile towards the boy, so we left, after leaving Street Universe's phone numbers with one of the men.

Since then, though eight months have passed, nobody has contacted Street Universe in connection with the boy. This was a clear indication that the boy's absence bothered no one. In the case of this boy, street life was preferable to home circumstances that were unbearable. As Hecht (1998) points out, it is important to place 'street children' within the context of what they have left behind if one wishes to understand their choice of the street.

This incident made me reflect on the 'missing children' programs and inserts that appear regularly on national television, and the founder of Street Universe confirmed that none of the Cape Town street kids have been officially reported as 'missing children', although many have parents and relatives. For some parents it might indeed be a relief that the children leave. Parker-Lewis (2001) touches on the issue of dysfunctional family life and links it with what she calls "stress communities" (2001:14) where high incidents of unemployment and alcohol abuse occur. Further research in this area would be an interesting challenge, as many perceive 'street children' to be homeless or orphans, which I quickly learned many are not.

Nevertheless, street life poses various problems for 'street children': Emotional problems, health problems, and exposure to exploitative practices. The emotional problems include their continuous search for people who can empathise with them, a fear that nobody will love them, fear of being alone, and serious hallucinations as a result of the use of abusive substances. One 26-year-old 'kid' told me about a day when he was sixteen and he was so high on glue that he felt the whole sky falling down on him. He was very scared and wanted to escape so he ran through the traffic, between hooting cars and ended up jumping into the back seat of a car. The driver hit him and told him to "get the hell out" of his car.

The children's exposure to exploitative practices appears to cause the most hidden scarring: rape, prostitution, illegal trading (gangs who use the smaller children to commit crime), exposure to fights, and victimisation. In addition to a variety of obvious health problems, (such as unhygienic conditions, contagious diseases, dental problems, tuberculosis, malnutrition, burns, stab wounds, etc.) the children's sleep rhythm is often disturbed. Most children also show a fear of medical treatment that results in them at times avoiding necessary treatment, with sometimes fatal consequences. They do not readily seek



professional help for illness and injuries, as they are afraid of authority. For example, one sixteen-year-old boy, who is seriously ill with TB, now has only one lung as a result of smoking and heavy sniffing of glue and thinners. Street Universe has repeatedly tried to place him in hospital for supervised TB treatment, but time after time he absconds. Once he drew a picture of the nurse, based on a character from *Heidi* (that of the strict teacher – Mrs. Rottermeyer) and left it on his bed before leaving the hospital. Could this be juxtaposed to the “freefloating world of the imagination” that Marina Warner (1994:37) talks about when referring to children’s “fluid make-believe play” which gives them “access to a world of wisdom”? At times it is the simplest of acts that give us insight into a child’s world, and it is, I believe, one of the most challenging tasks for a researcher to capture these moments of ‘play’. To me, the caricatured use of a cartoon character illustrates an indirect mockery of the system (institutions) reaffirming the child’s space on the streets.

### Street life in perspective

It is taken for granted that the street is the worst place for children to be (Hecht, 1998). Yet many of the children that I encountered during my volunteer work at Street Universe prefer street life to an unhappy home because street groups provide empathy and emotional security for the child and acceptance of who they are.

It is important for people working with street kids to recognise that in one way most ‘street children’ differ from other children in need of care, in that they have developed skills that enable them to function independently from adults and to survive under the direst circumstances of deprivation (of adequate shelter, clothing, food, etc). These skills, often considered pathological (Boyden, 1990), have been internalised by many children and youth living on the street as integral to normal socialisation.

What I have found unique to many of the children and youth that I have interacted with is their free spirit. It is important that this free spirit be sustained and nurtured if we want to help the ‘street child’ reach his/her full potential and become tomorrow’s responsible adult. With very little encouragement, their ability to assume responsibility, if given the chance, comes through in a way that I have not seen in children before, and

especially not in the common held negative images of 'street children' as previously mentioned.

There is a tendency amongst adults to construct childhood through their own eyes in order to protect and secure "happy childhoods" (Boyden, 1990:191) and therefore "adult protectiveness towards children (...) is tempered by the perceived need for control" (Boyden, 1990:188). In the streets, the children are not necessarily protected by adult figures, but by other children who are youth in their own right who assume leadership roles while suspending expectations present in adult-child relationships. My findings contradict the view that because of developmental reasons, usually cited in psychology research (Graue and Walsh, 1998, Burman, 1994) the role of adults is not available to children (Graue and Walsh, 1998). These authors argue that children cannot choose to take an adult role, disregarding the expectations of children in social situations and taking cues instead from adults. Having worked with the street children, I have learned that the adult-child boundaries are permeable. Differences should be minimised if we hope to have respectful accounts of children's experiences. Assumptions of immaturity and underestimation of children's abilities will not further understanding of their worlds nor help improve their lives.

During the internship at Street Universe I frequently saw examples of attempts by staff to manage the kids' experiences of loss and deprivation with idealized expectations and unrealistic goals<sup>15</sup>. One staff member expressed her despair indirectly through what appeared to be an obsession of unrealistically hopeful goals. As Street Universe was battling with internal organisational matters (See Chapter Four), she seemed to be acting on the powerful wish that the kids have their 'pristine' and idealized childhood returned to them. The impossibility of her unspoken wish seemed to drive the organisation into increasingly frenetic attempts to achieve their aims which finally left staff exhausted and unable to explore more appropriate ways of integrating the 'street children' into an existing

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<sup>15</sup> The establishment of a Youth Eco-Village away from the influences of city life (see Business Plan in Appendix four) was considered unreal by some staff. When other staff enquired about the Eco-Village with concern – as they were losing faith in her project - she explained her plans and vision convincingly. One staff referred to her obsession with the Eco-Village as 'the emperor's new clothes': her ideas about the Eco-Village, included in the organisation's business plan, were convincing to the point of make believe although the kids and other staff saw no evidence of progress thereof.

societal structure. Another staff member's more realistic approach, however painful, was the acknowledgement that, no matter how much reparative work is done, the deprivation experienced by the street kids can never be undone and has to be recognised as a "permanent loss".

Whether obsessed with unrealistic goals or acknowledging a "permanent loss", I learned that having established respect and trust with many street kids, Street Universe as a whole has tactfully allowed their potential to unfold while also acknowledging that institutionalising children and youth that live on the street may be counterproductive and dehumanising. My experience of working with 'street children' in Cape Town has taught me that children can and do negotiate and challenge protection 'packages' that render them pure and angelic.

Despite the good intentions of people running programmes for 'street children', three major problems are still unresolved, namely 1) that the scale of assistance can barely dent the size of the need; 2) many programmes are still very formal and restrictive; and 3) 'street children' are regarded as delinquents and therefore seen as a "physical menace" (Glauser in James and Prout, 1990:147) to public urban space (Scheper-Hughes, 1998). What is overlooked is that street kids, like any other people "in the path of civilization (... ) have aesthetic sensibilities, and ways of life complete and proper in their own terms" (Glauser, 1990:145). Therefore they often return to the free way of street life.

Thus despite all the negative aspects of street life, and though living in a competitive hostile environment, a positive aspect from the child's perspective is that he/she earns more money on the street than at home or elsewhere. It is also evident in many cases that on the street children learn life skills; they have to learn to think creatively and 'differently' since they continually have to devise strategies in order to survive (Boyden, 1990). One could also argue that in some instances street life may fulfil a child's desire for adventure. Without wishing to put a romantic gloss on street life for children, it appears that for many, choosing that life is indeed a rational survival choice.

There has been a tendency to approach problems related to 'street children' within a narrow perspective, which ignores the deeper causes for their poor quality of life. This narrow approach has led to the blaming of individuals rather than social factors for problems, and to policies aimed at rectifying the individual rather than general social conditions.

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## **Chapter 4 – Communication and other organisational matters**

(...) ethnographies are mostly about subjects caught in the complexities of dominant regimes of power, and their critical thrust concerns questions of agency, feeling, and being within a certain moral economy in which explicit judgements are made about justice and virtue (Marcus, 1998:20).

Marcus (1998) encourages anthropologists to explore these complexities, those he calls “uncomfortable ambiguities” (1998:20). As anthropologists have in the last decade or two been moving away from the traditional study of ‘peoples’ (Marcus, 1998; Sanjek, 1990; Strathern, 2000) anthropologists place themselves, at times uncomfortably, within and between groups in opposition. As discussed in Chapter 2, not taking sides is sometimes not an ethical option. Whereas my research was never a matter of soul-searching, it made me reflect on what my boundaries as the anthropologist are, working within the constraints of an organisational structure.

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This chapter is based on data gathered to comprise a report for Street Universe (Realities of Organisational Communication and Conflict). It is the result of my first-hand experience of ‘talking’ to realities of power and indirectly assessing Street Universe’s results.

Results should be assessed primarily in terms of established goals and available resources. Blanc (1995) suggest that effective projects and programmes seem to be those which, besides really helping some children, have also constantly re-oriented their field of action as a result of both self-evaluations of their own practices and assessments of the children’s needs.

As I engaged in in-depth conversations with staff, I started to build up a picture of a fragmented organisation in which layers of contrasting models co-existed. Some staff and volunteers/interns felt there was a lack of guidelines and had different perceptions of their tasks and roles. In the previous chapter I touched on staff members’ different approaches to

the situation of the 'street children'. Some wanted the street kids to be dependent, well behaved and contained, which they openly expressed in terms of a need for more discipline and more formal organisational framework, that is, they believed the kids needed control. Others had a more open approach to the individuals' emotional needs, emphasising close relationships and 'normal' interaction. They saw the kids as basically good but abused and in need of encouragement and nurture.

This two-sided response ended up only highlighting the organisation's inadequacies and prevented it from pursuing those tasks which it was capable of undertaking. Lack of clarity led to feelings of incapacity and staff often became frustrated with one another or even with the street kids, for recalling to them their own feelings of inadequacy. My impression, listening to all these views and expressed frustrations, was that their difficulties in dealing with certain situations had much to do with the absence of a clear and shared understanding of Street Universe's primary tasks.

### Starting Point

The day I was supposed to start at Street Universe, Paddy told me they were all very busy because the Laureus Foundation (see footnote 12) was in Cape Town, and asked if I could start the following week. That is when I first learned that Street Universe had been formally selected by the World Sports Academy as the South African beneficiary of that year's significant funding. I started my internship on the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 2002. As yet no brief had been given to me after Paddy explained the "difficulty in prescribing anthropological research" because "little structure exists in which Street Universe encounters the street children/youth". However, he suggested I evaluate the drumming program, co-ordinated by Noel. It had recently begun and he was excited about it because the street kids had welcomed it with great enthusiasm. Noel gave me the impression that there was not much evaluation to do regarding the drumming, but said "check it out and see what you think about it".

Street Universe had approached an organisation called Red Zebra to co-ordinate and carry forward a drumming programme. Red Zebra is an organisation that specialises in

improving people's ability to communicate through music workshops. Mark, from Red Zebra, taught the drumming, and with the help of staff, volunteers and street kids, brought a variety of drums and percussion items to the drumming session. I attended four drumming sessions, which took place on a corner of busy Buitengracht Street on a grassy patch. The sessions were not tightly organised. Kids arrived from right and left, but no attendance lists were kept and after each session, the group of kids dispersed and back to the office we went with the drums. With Street Universe's marketing objective in mind, namely, to improve the community's perception of street kids by not wanting to convey a message of the kids as being destitute, poor and without hope, but rather one of "what these kids could attain if given the right structure and opportunities", I thought the drumming programme an excellent idea. Mark, the instructor, was very enthusiastic throughout the sessions and the kids seemed to thoroughly enjoy drumming away their stress and tensions. The first sessions were full of laughter and kids would come running to drum. There would be between 15 and 30 kids in a session.

For two weeks the programme seemed to go smoothly, and yet I noticed the kids' enthusiasm was fading. The novelty had worn off and the regularity of the drumming programme seemed to be falling apart. Fewer and fewer kids were attending, as they were losing interest and felt at times used by the organisation for its purposes when they were asked to play at a certain venue, and yet they felt alienated from the process. For example the kids felt they did not have a say concerning the money raised at events<sup>16</sup> where they performed and each individual wanted some of that money. It became more and more difficult to attract the kids to join the drumming programme. Mark asked Noel and the volunteers to make sure there was a group of kids ready twice a week for each two-hour drumming session. I talked to some younger boys who were sitting outside the outreach office, on Bree Street, next to Community Chest about it, and they were very negative about the programme: "They want us to drum and drum but there is no food, and I'm hungry. I don't want to drum". Their body language was filled with anger, and one even pushed me away when I mentioned the drumming.

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<sup>16</sup> "All door proceeds to Street Universe" would be written on pamphlets advertising events or performances. The entry fees varied between R30 and R50 per person, and the kids could estimate the amounts collected at the door, according to an often full house.

This was a first indication of miscommunication of aims and intentions of the drumming programme as well as a lack of consideration of the kids' possible expectations. The programme was intended to benefit the kids but they saw no advantage in participating regularly. The drumming programme was called off after having operated for two months.

### Reflections on Communication and Organisational Behaviour

#### *Rumours and assumptions*

At the time, I was unaware of what was going on within the organisation, and it was after reflecting upon earlier conversations with Paddy that the topic for the report was changed. I aired my views with Clifford Martinus (Cliffy), outreach manager of the organisation, and suggested four different topics that I thought useful - for the organisation – to explore:

- a) to look at networks, co-ordinations and interactions with other organisations that work with street people,
- b) to follow court appearances and their ramifications closely and follow up on the outcome of court cases,
- c) to register attendance of kids at outreach office and various programs, and follow up on regular kids, and
- d) to focus on communication within the organisation, i.e. what is and what is not talked about, communication channels and structures, etc.

Because of the short duration of the internship (nine weeks), together with Cliffy I decided to focus on communication as my main interest and concern. I believed that understanding communication flows would result in a more accurate understanding of the organisational behaviour than simply examining some of the structural arrangements. From talking to staff and kids who regularly visited the office, and having developed a sense of the organisation, I noticed some difficulties concerning communication flows. I thought it important to understand the organisational behaviour in order to a) increase efficiency in carrying out activities, b) clear misunderstandings regarding allocation of responsibilities, c)



minimise interpersonal tensions or conflicts regarding daily duties, and d) better clarify aims and expectations in advance, so that fewer tensions would arise.

On 5<sup>th</sup> April 2002, Braam Malherbe, the newly assigned managing director called a meeting for all staff and volunteers to talk about the present and future situation of Street Universe. Present was also a 'business consultant', called in to help Street Universe become a more efficient organisation. Amongst other things, Braam spoke about the importance of communication and the importance of team building. I asked whether this kind of meeting could be held more regularly, for example, on a monthly basis. The business consultant agreed that it was important that the communication channels be kept open and regular and that everybody was happy and knew what was going on, because it was one thing hearing something from informal conversations (gossip, assumptions and rumours) and another to hear it "from the horse's mouth". Everybody was present at the meeting, including Linzi, the then director. Three months later no similar meetings had been held. In the meantime, Linzi had resigned and that I heard only informally by one staff member and one volunteer telling me "Did you know..." and "You know what?..."

Another example of gossip, rumours and assumptions recurred when the drumming programme silently died out. For two months it was there, and then one day it was gone. Was it because of internal conflicts within management? Financial disagreements between instructor and organisation? Personality clashes? These were the questions some staff members, interns and volunteers asked themselves but nobody was ready or confident enough to bring the doubts to an open forum.

At that first same staff meeting, Braam rightly touched on the disruptive nature of damaging rumours, which, are inevitably deeply ingrained in organisational life. A lot of the information that circulates within organisations is based on assumptions (Gibson et al 1997). Assumptions and rumours can be troublesome, create doubts and often a negative work environment, and lead to anxieties or fears and incertitude of staff: what is true? what don't I know and why?, etc. Therefore efficient adequate information is very important. In this respect, I emphasised in my report to Street Universe the dangers of rumours and assumptions which were disrupting organisational activities. Rumours are difficult to correct

when the information becomes publicly accepted (Gibson et al 1997). However, I also noted that some rumours could lead to a positive outcome, for example in the case where those who circulated rumours expressed wishes and hopes which was often the case. Solutions to work problems can be a result of staff verbally expressing desire for change. As long as these rumours are not heard, considered and acted upon by decision-makers within the organisation, they have little to no effect. I also emphasised that even though the tone may be negative, these kinds of rumours still represent staff concerns for the organisation and its goals.

Staff members often complained about never being informed about why certain programmes were becoming irregular. As management and outreach staff were not communicating with each other there was a general sense of confusion at all levels of the organisation. One staff member told me he felt he was not being treated as staff because he was given no feedback on regular meetings at the head office. Volunteers and interns also regularly expressed their frustrations as they felt many aspects of the organisation were disorganised: activities were irregular, time was being wasted, and they were not being informed about what was going on at Street Universe. The longer I stayed at Street Universe, I witnessed less and less structure in the work of the organisation: programmes were cancelled, re-arranged or postponed, no camp follow-ups took place, and promises were made to kids and not kept. All the kids had been told – formally and informally – about the ‘Youth Development Village’ (also referred to as the ‘Eco Village’). High hopes and expectations had been raised, but the phases were constantly delayed. The street kids were prepared for the ‘Eco-Village’, but the ‘Eco-Village was never prepared for the kids and was thus never implemented throughout my eleven month presence. This had to do with internal organisational difficulties, such as financial matters, which were withheld from the kids. Some staff members had less and less hope about the future of the organisation and questioned whether it indeed had a future. Some were convinced there was no future and that valuable financial and human resources were being wasted.

### *Communication Flaws: Marketing an Image or Self-Delusion?*

There were a variety of issues that intrigued me regarding 'communication' at Street Universe, first and foremost the 'disappearance' of Paddy as discussed in Introduction (p. 7). Then there were the inconsistencies and irregularities of the drumming programme, which I was supposed to evaluate. There were at first regular drumming times twice a week. After two weeks, the times were changed repeatedly and soon the sessions were being postponed. After six weeks of the drumming being on and off, Mark became frustrated with Street Universe (as well as Street Universe being frustrated with him) and stopped the co-ordination of the programme. It became apparent to me after consulting with Cliffy and Noel that there was a conflict of financial interests between Mark and Street Universe.

Besides these issues I also noticed that appointments were not kept within the outreach office, causing frustration amongst street kids and visitors, such as potential volunteers. Over a nine-week period (January-March 2002), complaints about appointments not being kept or forgotten occurred at least twice a week. The opening hours of the outreach office were irregular, that is, doors were locked when supposed to be open and sometimes no staff were available for whole mornings or afternoons. Every week kids complained about the doors being locked at noon at the time when doors were officially opened for them, especially if it was Monday or Friday when it was "video day". They would yell, shout, complain, bang on the doors and cause a commotion to the considerable annoyance of neighbouring businesses. Internal organisational matters, partly resulting from Paddy's sudden resignation plunged the organisation into a period of transition. This was time and energy consuming and affected the programmes run by the outreach department. It also affected the daily routines, such as 'street walking' and 'medication' scheduled times. Above all, the most affected were the street kids who were neglected.

In addition to the above, no feedback was given from executive staff meetings, causing tension and mistrust amongst some staff and volunteers/interns. I felt there was an urgent need for team-building efforts. There would be secrecy among staff, causing some to feel deprived of 'privileged' information. I was offended when I expressed my frustration to a senior member of staff and he told me: "Cecilia, this is like a big fish tank, and you are

only a tiny little guppy in it". I was made aware that my range of movement was restricted and that there was only so much I could critically engage in. A feeling of discouragement about my role at Street Universe lingered for days.

At times I felt strongly that I was not supposed to know what was going on within the organisation, and I felt discomfort when I sought certain staff members' opinion. But I wanted to make them understand that I was more than a volunteer, I needed them to know it was important for me, in order to maximise my role for Street Universe's benefit. It became apparent that Paddy, with whom I had made initial contact, had not discussed my internship with anyone, and that is why nobody really knew why I was there. In fact, in the last week of my internship, Linzi had phoned the outreach office, and I answered. She was looking for somebody else, but she chatted to me first. She said she would like to talk to me, about what I was doing because she would like me to get involved in another organisation that works with street kids, and she asked me to go and volunteer to do night shifts at the Clarrie Center in Claremont<sup>17</sup>, a shelter for street boys. One of the outreach staff felt embarrassed by this as I had now been in Street Universe for seven weeks without the director knowing they had a full-time intern and he was also angry that this particular dangerous assignment had been suggested to a female intern. This was more than a mere communication lapse. It was insensitive, naive and inappropriate.

It was at times very awkward for me and other volunteers/interns, when a visitor or new volunteer came, to have to explain about regular programmes and projects, when we could see most of them had ruptures and were losing structure. Drumming sessions were constantly being cancelled or postponed, allocated times for 'medication'<sup>18</sup> (mostly cleaning wounds and changing bandages) were irregular, the surf-skiing programme was postponed until further notice, court attendances were written in the quarterly planner, yet there were no reports or regular follow-ups, 'streetwalking'<sup>19</sup> became a late morning coffee shop

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<sup>17</sup> In Cape Town's Southern Suburbs, approximately ten kilometres away from the city centre.

<sup>18</sup> A term used for medical treatments, from treating stab wounds to giving painkillers.

<sup>19</sup> 'Streetwalking' ideally took place at 9.30 in the morning and refers to walking through some of the streets of the city centre, interacting with the kids, informing them on changes in programmes or daily events and reporting back to the outreach manager. Feedback was neither documented, nor was it consistent. There were no regular feedback sessions.

routine for volunteers and some permanent staff. No time was allocated for formal feedback on streetwalking.

Volunteers found themselves reciting to newcomers weekly programmes drawn on a board by volunteers or interns (as requested by Cliffy, the outreach manager) within a quarterly planner: “Monday we have drumming, Tuesdays we have soccer, Wednesday we have kayaking”, etc. and minutes later commenting on the ridicule of the situation. We all knew that an image of Street Universe was being ‘sold’ which was contrary to the day-to-day reality. Of course I understood that not everybody needed to be equally informed about the current situation of Street Universe, and that certain information was irrelevant for certain staff and volunteers, such as financial and administrative information. Nevertheless, the very poor information flow seriously hampered the activities of the organisation and hence frustrated its own goals.

### Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication is always contextual and situational, in other words it does not happen in isolation. People come from different backgrounds, have different capabilities for learning, different levels of education, different attitudes, beliefs and aspiration levels. In the report I presented to Street Universe I identified three aspects of relevance when talking about any kind of communication<sup>20</sup> - interrelated in reality but separate here only for analytic purposes:

- The *psychological context*, which is who you are and what you bring to the interaction; your needs, desires, values, personality, etc. It was in this context that I often noticed some miscommunication between volunteers/interns, staff and street kids, for example when intervening in a conflict, or when assessing a situation. On one occasion a conflict arose between a staff member and a volunteer when they clashed on different ways of handling a situation. In this instance Cliffy, the outreach manager, took both individuals aside and explained to them that people can have different ideas about resolving a

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<sup>20</sup> From *Four Principles of Interpersonal Communication* in [www.soapboxorations.com](http://www.soapboxorations.com) (accessed 4<sup>th</sup> of March 2002).

conflict and that it does not necessarily mean that one is wrong. He explained to the staff member that the volunteer was his work colleague and that as such she should be respected and he should co-work on solving the conflict, not push the volunteer to the side. Other times volunteers acted upon emotion and feelings when inappropriate, according to Cliffy, who would then mediate by shedding light on the given situation.

- The *spatial context*, which deals with the psycho-social of 'where' you are communicating. An interaction that takes place in a meeting or at the office, will be qualitatively different from one that takes place in a bar. The context is important, as the kids' interaction with staff and volunteers/interns would at times be radically different depending on the place. For example, some kids would be more aggressive and 'in your face' on the street and would soften up the minute Street Universe was mentioned. At other times I witnessed how the younger kids became openly affectionate and playful with staff and volunteers/interns in the presence of police. It suggested to me how important it is for some of them to show the 'enemy' (law enforcement) – if at times manipulatively - that they too are humans and need care, protection and love.
- The *cultural context*, which includes all the learned behaviours, e.g. eye contact, body language, tone of voice, etc., for example there was always in one way or another a gap between volunteers and some staff (who were all South African). Some staff jokingly referred to some European (especially German) volunteers being 'cold' and 'stiff'. One was amused about the coldness of a girl when he hugged her. She then said that "where she comes from" friendly hugging was not normal and that it was something she had learnt in Cape Town. Many kids were very affectionate and as a result volunteers sometimes felt overwhelmed and insecure about how to interact with the kids. Cultural differences also seemed to dictate the choice of videos that were shown to the kids. Rarely did the non-South African volunteers approve of violent action films – always requested by the kids.

But I have learnt through observation that interpersonal communication is complicated. If communication can fail, it will, and if a message can be understood in different ways, it will often be understood in just that way which does the most harm. This reminds us of the difficulty of accurate communication, not least in an environment when

every day one deals with people who are under the influence of alcohol, glue, thinners and drugs most of the time.

### Recommendations about communication highlighted in report

After finishing my required full-time internship, but staying on at the organisation on a part-time, volunteer basis, I realised that the realities of power, politics and communication had changed with the rapid growth and change of Street Universe. I was not in a position to put forth a full evaluation of the organisation. However, from my observations and conversations, four key issues that were overshadowed by organisational and managerial problems emerged:

- *communication between head office and outreach staff.* Regular meetings, for example, on a monthly basis, should take place, providing a platform for all staff (from head office and outreach) and volunteers/interns to express opinions on work progress, working environment, etc. A formal regular Street Universe newsletter could help. However this would entail additional work, time and resources for an organisation that is short of staff and where the staff is overworked. Additionally, I think it important that the outreach office set a time once a week where outreach staff and volunteers can report back on the week's events, raise problems and discuss future plans. Developing and supporting mechanisms of feedback involve far more than following up on informal communications. Rather, to be effective, feedback needs to occur regularly, be engaging, responsive and directed towards a commonly desired outcome.
- *overly centralised leadership style.* Outreach staff should be empowered to make decisions and they should be recognised as key players as they are the foot soldiers of the organisation. Also, recognition should be shared, for example when the organisation features in the media. Outreach staff should also receive due recognition for their role. The lack of recognition has created frustration amongst outreach staff because only the staff from head office have been acknowledged through their repeated appearance in the media.
- *well-developed systems for evaluation and staff training.* Staff training and development is considered to be a crucial element of the effectiveness of organisations (Gibson et al.

1997). Providing training opportunities and professional backup for personnel should be actively pursued. Untrained staff should, for example, be given an introductory course on street education. Evaluation of all staff should be consistent and done on a regular basis. Working with street children and youth is physically and psychologically taxing and requires that frontline staff receive ongoing support and technical training.

- *co-ordination of interns and volunteers.* Structures should be put in place to provide some kind of programme or routine work for volunteers and interns. That is, it should be clear to everyone what volunteers/interns can/cannot do and someone should be responsible for supervising that. It would benefit the organisation for all staff to be informed about arrivals of new volunteers and staff. A staff member should be given the responsibility of briefing them and informing them about the current state of and changes in the organisation. It is of utmost importance that communication channels do not break down and that all staff members and volunteers/interns are informed of any relevant organisational changes, such as discontinuing programmes and formal/informal changes in staff. Failure to inform adequately results in staff insecurity, cynicism, interpersonal tensions all of which ‘communicates’ itself negatively to the very people for whose benefit the organisations exists: the kids. If volunteers/interns are entrusted to inform and explain what Street Universe is about to new volunteers/interns (or other visitors (journalists, tourists, etc.)) it would be appropriate that they be briefed regularly in order to avoid misrepresentation or self-delusion. This would be beneficial and help avoid confusion, especially when at monthly (and sometimes weekly) intervals, foreign tourists or journalists, who come to Street Universe show interest. They should be professionally briefed about the organisation. My experience was that some volunteers/interns and even some staff were not competent or comfortable presenting the work of Street Universe.

One recommendation, which I failed to point out in the report, is that it is imperative for the work of Street Universe that a system be set up which will allow staff to collect and update information on the lives and circumstances of the individuals they work closely with. This information should be incorporated into the existing service delivery (outreach and intervention) programme and should serve as a tool and be accessible to all staff.



Working at Street Universe has taught me the importance of uncovering the complexities of communication which directly or indirectly were impacting on the success of the organisation. Doing fieldwork in an organisational setting was a challenge through which I learned how an open flow of communication channels can determine the prosperity of an organisation.

University of Cape Town

## **Chapter 5 – Conclusion**

In chapters three and four I have dealt respectively with dynamics of children and youth on the street and the internal dynamics of an NGO called Street Universe. I now bring the two together by considering the way in which the organisation's predicaments had a direct effect on the 'street children'. I have come to the conclusion that due to uncertainty and insecurity of staff, constricted communication channels and a centralised leadership style, the quality of the work of Street Universe and services provided to the street kids was oftentimes compromised. Could it be that the organisation's internal structure was such that it could no longer sustain itself and in particular could no longer maintain a flourishing relationship with the street kids of Cape Town?

In thinking about my role as researcher, I have frequently wondered what I was trying to achieve by working with Street Universe. Looking back, I think I was trying to inject some energy and ideas into the organisation. My hope was to help outreach staff to exercise more authority over their situation and the future of the organisation. Often, I felt overwhelmed by a sense of passivity, lack of initiative and feelings of resignation expressed by staff. At times I felt negative and angry with the situation, unable to see any positive outcome from my intervention. I frequently tried to inspire hope to direct the organisation towards a more purposeful way of functioning. However, it is up to the management and other staff to decide if they want to make an impact on the future of Street Universe and how, just as, in the end, it is up to the street kids what they will make of their lives.

I had to conform to the fact that I was not there to rescue an organisation, but to make sense of what was affecting the staff's job satisfaction (and to a certain extent self-esteem) which in turn was linked to the future of the children and youth they worked with. How could these young people learn to take control over their lives if some staff felt they had no control over their role in the organisation? I witnessed how difficult it was for Street Universe staff to consider any change, even if change means moving on from a situation of great uncertainty and unhappiness to something possibly better, or at least, more clearly defined. Very often, individuals would withdraw, compromising the capacity for problem solving. Unless individuals can be empowered to speak, whether on their behalf or on

behalf of a group, negative working conditions at Street Universe are unlikely to change. If anxiety can be contained, then what needs to be talked about can be named and the effectiveness of the organisation recovered. Where the organisational matters affecting communication are not dealt with they not only impact on the success of Street Universe but are also enacted in the relationship with the individuals with whom the organisation works.

In the midst of all the confusion and almost disillusion of staff and volunteers/interns, I have learned that while the street kids share a universe of invisible rights and scarred emotions, which the social system caused, exacerbated and even at the best of times has failed to heal, Street Universe could provide healing, opportunities and a platform for interpersonal communication between the kids and the rest of society. When in need of advice, comfort, encouragement, a helping hand or a listening ear, many kids knew they could approach Street Universe staff, specifically the outreach staff. I began to understand this was how, as an outreach agency, Street Universe wanted to position itself for maximum contact with minimum discomfort for the kids, despite the organisational changes that were occurring. I observed how kids can feel empowered by caring adults who help them bridge the chasm between hostile and healing worlds. One could see how many kids had an open and honest relationship with particular members of the outreach staff. For example, there were two young boys, at the time living in a shelter in Claremont, who would come to the city by train to visit the outreach office. I had seen them and asked a staff member why they were in town and not at the shelter in Claremont and with a broad smile he told me that the boys had “just come to visit us”. The many Cape Town street children and youth that I encountered during my involvement with Street Universe showed that they need people willing to act as stepping stones, to get close, invest a lot, risk a lot, at times endure a lot of abuse, and still be there. The outreach staff, with whom I was working, tried to be constant in their attention to the calls of the kids, despite ruptures in communication channels and the structures of the organisation.

I have partly attempted to capture some thoughts and feelings of ‘street children’ as experienced through my work at Street Universe. I was not inclined to write an authoritative academic ethnography about ‘street children’, but by touching on the issue of social and cultural construction of the term most commonly attached to these individuals, I have

wanted to dispel the myth of marginality so tightly linked to 'street children'. Further research within the specific Cape Town context should look closely at uncovering the social construction of 'street children' and the role of social institutions, social categories and the influence of ideology in the formation of meaning attributed to the represented lives of 'street children', that is, the processes involved in the construction of the term.

University of Cape Town

## **Afterword**

*(February 2003)*

After finishing my internship and post-internship part-time volunteer work with Street Universe many changes occurred within the organisation. Most significant were the questionable dismissal of the outreach manager and the resignation of the senior youth work co-ordinator, both highly respected individuals with many years of experience working with ‘street children’ and youth in general and – from my perspective - valuable sources of knowledge for the organisation.

A vital change was the relocation of head office staff to the premises the organisation occupies in Saltriver. I hope this change helps to bridge the gap between outreach staff and management leading to improved communication. It is unfortunate that due to these changes, the direct work with the street kids came to a standstill and for one month (since the organisation opened after the Christmas break (23<sup>rd</sup> of December to 13<sup>th</sup> of January) up to date no programmes have been operating until further notice.

It saddens me to see the work with the children and youth compromised due to internal ruptures in the structure of the organisation. This reality has unfortunately been reflected in the media, in a newspaper article (Cape Times, 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2003. See Appendix seven) that sums up some of the issues discussed in this thesis. In the article, the founder of Street Universe and former director talks about “long-term legal battles to retain her vision” which convinced her of leaving the organisation. In the same article a street kid mentions the inadequacy of Street Universe’s relocation from the city center because, he says, “now it is difficult for us to get there and they do not know so much what is happening on the streets”.

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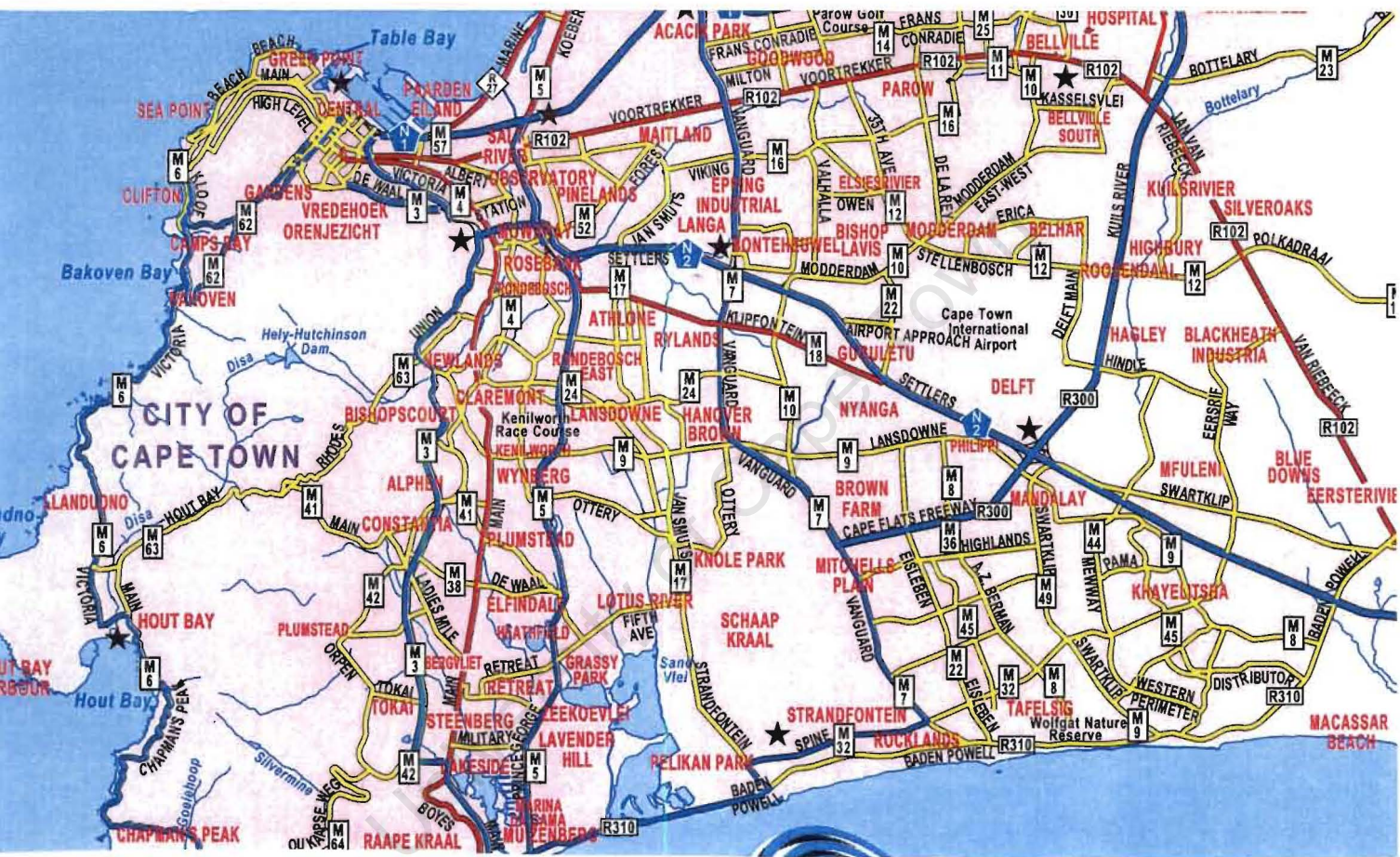
Children's Charter of South Africa: [www.anc.org.za/misc/childcht.html](http://www.anc.org.za/misc/childcht.html) (accessed 18<sup>th</sup> of September 2002)

Four Principles of Interpersonal Communication: [www.soapboxorations.com](http://www.soapboxorations.com) (accessed 4<sup>th</sup> of March 2002)

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org) (accessed 18<sup>th</sup> of September 2002)



## APPENDIX 1



Map of Cape Town and surrounds (not to scale)



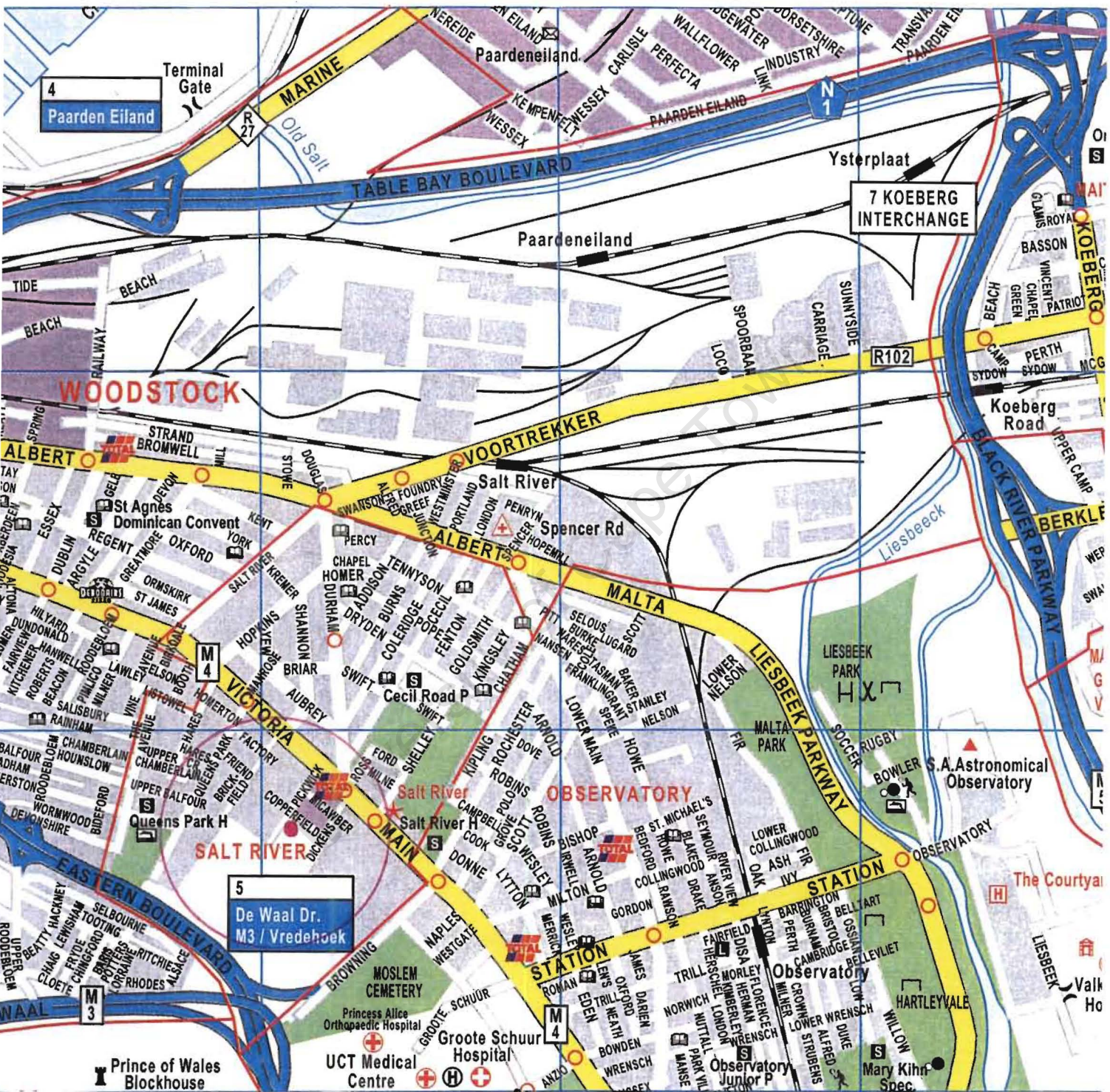
## APPENDIX 2



Map of Cape Town city centre (not to scale). Street Universe's previous premises in Bree Street and current head office in Burg Street highlighted.



## APPENDIX 3



Map of Saltriver and Woodstock (not to scale). Street Universe premises in Pickwick Street highlighted.

## APPENDIX 4

# STREET UNIVERSE BUSINESS PLAN

JULY 2001

University of Cape Town

## MISSION

To create opportunities and structures for street children  
and youth as well as the broader community;  
for their mutual upliftment

## VISION

A Universe of opportunities that will enable hardened street children and youth to  
take responsibility in becoming constructive self-sustainable community members.

---

Once sustainable the model will be replicated  
in other communities throughout Africa

### Contact details

Street Universe

81 Bree Street, Cape Town, 8001, South Africa

Tel: +27 21 424 4315 / 4377

Fax: +27 21 424 4310

Email: [friends@streetuniverse.org.za](mailto:friends@streetuniverse.org.za)

Web site: [www.streetuniverse.org.za](http://www.streetuniverse.org.za)

Paddy Upton +27 83 212 6509

Linzi Thomas +27 73 172 4488



## BACKGROUND

Street Universe's initial research period of 15 months (11/99 - 01/01) was aimed at identifying and understanding the individual needs of the hardened street children/ youth, and to identify the structures that need to be implemented, and the changes that are required, in order for them to realise their true potential. Through a 24 hour-a-day, 7 day-a-week availability and hands-on approach, trust and respect was established with over 400 street people from the Cape Town CBD and surrounds. Participation in sport and excursions into nature were the primary activities that facilitated building relationships. We learned the street culture, came to recognize their methods of survival, and appreciate the mutual impact that the street people and their surroundings have upon each other. Accordingly, the Street Universe plans are not based on theory, but rather on invaluable, interactive hands-on experience, and/or have been uniquely developed in consultation with both the street people of Cape Town and with those effected by them.

We have consulted with experts across various fields. We network with several organisations, government structures, police, businesses and others who are affected by, impact on or who can aid and support the hardened street children/ youth. We promote and maintain an open door for interaction from all sectors of the community that are willing to positively contribute to the organisation and its' members.

It has been rewarding for us to experience the return of love and affection by the street people. They want a better future and we have seen how motivated they are becoming in the attempt to change their lives, even to the extent of turning their backs on drugs and crime. We believe in and trust the majority of the street people and know that they have both plans and intentions to realize their potential and their dreams. Their requirement from us is to create a platform for them to be seen and heard, an opportunity to develop their potential, and a safety net to catch them if they stumble or fall.

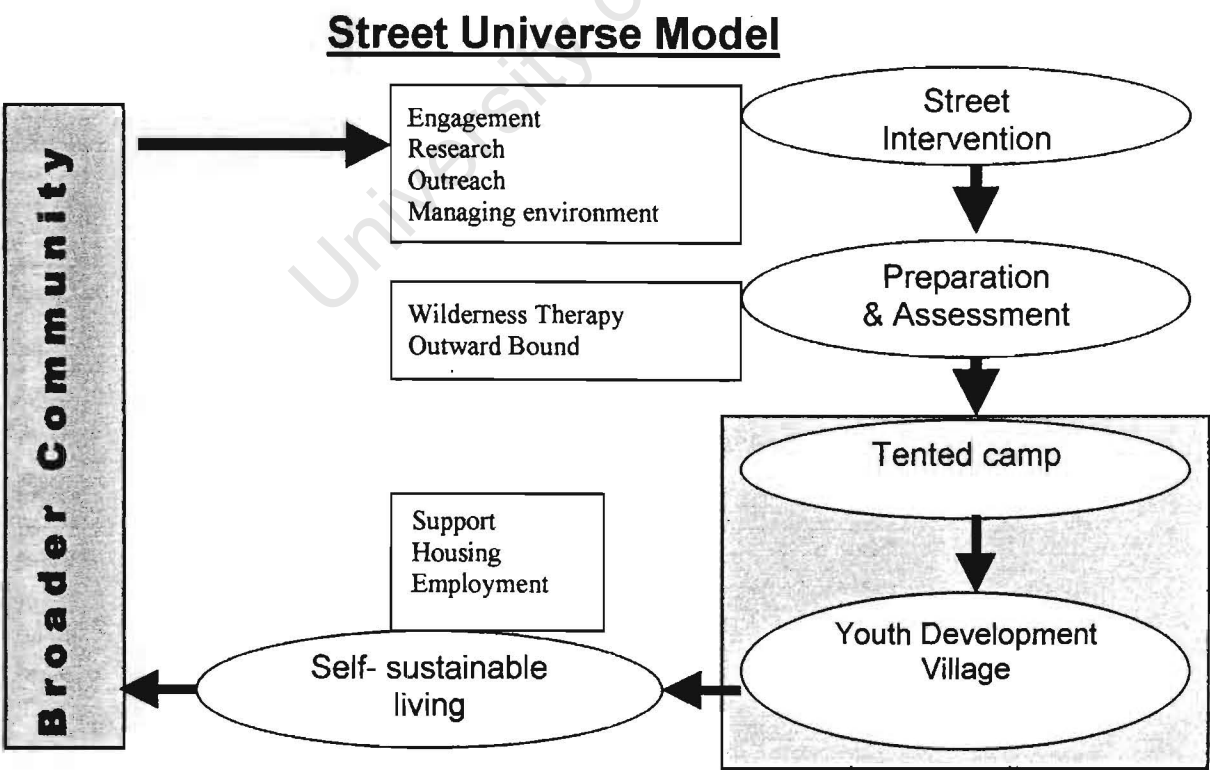
Founder, Linzi Thomas is a successful film producer, having facilitated productions for, amongst other, Jennifer Lopez in "The Cell". Managing Director, Paddy Upton, (M.Sc. (medicine) UCT), spent four years as full-time fitness trainer with the South African Cricket team. Linzi and Paddy self-funded the first 18 months of operation.

GENERAL AIM

To ensure that each street-hardened child/ youth, currently living on the streets of the Cape Town Unicity, receives the appropriate support, opportunities and intervention that they require to achieve a long-term self-sustainable life-style as members of our broader community.

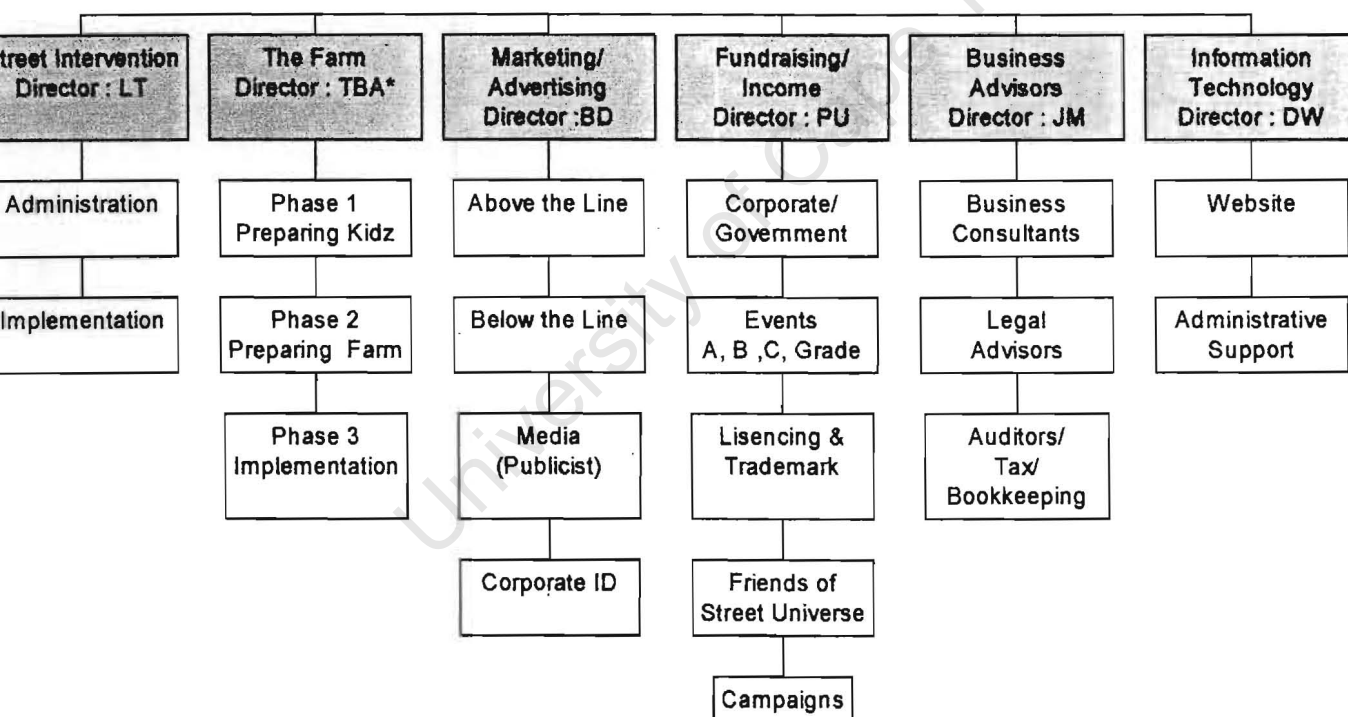
ABBREVIATED MODEL

When a child/ youth exits the broader community and adopts a life on the street, their needs will be attended to in the Street Intervention programme. This programme immediately seeks to relocate them to a safe “home” environment. For the already street hardened, the Street Intervention programme provides a range of sporting opportunities and recreational/ educational alternatives to street life, with the aim of assessing and preparing them for rehabilitation and development at a Youth Development Village. This will be situated in a **safe** and **friendly** environment away from the negative influences of city/ street life. For Youth Village graduates, the aim is to source a homely living environment, to maintain a personal support base and to source/ provide a range of vocational opportunities which will enable self-sustainable living in chosen areas within the broader community.



## BUSINESS STRUCTURE

Street Universe is an association incorporated under section 21 (registration no. 2001/019143/08). It currently has six active and specialist directors (details in annexure). The Board of Executors (BoE) bank is a founding sponsor and banking partner. Ensuring absolute accountability, BoE manage all financial draw downs, which are reviewed monthly by audit firm Moores Rowland. To maximise finance for the direct benefit of the street children/ youth, all non-executive directors offer their expertise on a pro-bono basis, as do all marketing/ advertising functions, business advisors and web site builders (listed below). Thus Street Intervention and The Youth Village are the only expense-incurring functions. Everything we do is executed professionally, with integrity and we hold ourselves accountable to our supporters and to the street people.



LT = Linzi Thomas (Founder)

BD = Bobby Duffus

PU = Paddy Upton (Managing Director)

JM = Johan Malherbe

DW = Dale Williams

TBA = Director/ Project Manager has been identified, but has yet to be contracted



## ABBREVIATED OVERVIEW OF FUNCTIONS

### • STREET INTERVENTION

Street Intervention refers to all work relating to the inner-city interaction with the street children/ youth, as well as interaction the immediate environment that impacts upon them.

Engagement: Through our extensive “reach” into the street environment, we aim to engage new arrivals on the street within their first 24 hours.

Research: Initiating and/or coordinating research by academic institutions, as well as compiling and updating a comprehensive database of each individual street child/youth’s past and present circumstances, and future aspirations. Presently, we have documentation on over 250 hardened street children and youth.

Outreach: Providing alternatives to daily street life. A programme of sporting activities is the focus and flagship of Street Intervention (See annexure, “Accomplishments”). Recreation, education (AIDS, drug, health, crime awareness etc.) and cultural activities provide additional alternatives to street life. All outreach projects aim to prepare “candidates” for the Youth Village. Outreach extends into all prisons and places of safety where our street children/ youth might be detained.

Managing the Environment: Includes facilitating understanding and establishing positive relationships, primarily via sport activities, between the street children/ youth and the immediate community, services and businesses with which they interact on a daily basis. Included is being available 24 hours daily for crisis management.

### • PREPARATION AND ASSESSMENT (Transformation)

Children/ youth who have shown commitment towards the Street Intervention programmes and who have shown a desire to change their lives, will enter a 2-3 week Wilderness Transformation process. Personal transformation and rehabilitation from substance dependency/ abuse and gangsterism, is initiated via the Wilderness Therapy Institute’s (psychology-based) endurance hiking and camping expedition, and/or Outward Bound’s development through problem solving, adventure activities.

- **THE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT VILLAGE**

The aim of the Youth Village is to facilitate extended development of the street children/ youth in a natural, safe and friendly environment, away from the negative influences of street life where behavioral patterns are dominated by the instinct to survive. A self-sustainable community will provide the hardened street children/ youth with a holistic, stimulating and developmental environment, in which to deal with their past and to shape their future. The pillars of the Youth Village will be SPORT, EDUCATION, LIFE SKILLS and VOCATIONAL SKILLS. Contact with families, friends remaining in the street environment, and the broader community will be encouraged, so as to avoid institutionalisation.

Phase One - Preparing the street children for the Youth Village

This phase has been successfully implemented, and continues to operate on a daily basis. Candidates from the CBD have already been identified, prepared, and have all enthusiastically conveyed their willingness and excitement to partake.

Phase Two - Preparing the Youth Village for the street children

This requires the contracting of the appropriate project development team, and for them to identify and prepare the Youth Village for the children. A development team has been identified and they await funding in order to proceed.

Phase Three – Implementation

This is dependent upon the findings of the project management team. Implementation is achievable within 12 months.

- **MARKETING AND ADVERTISING**

In order that the Street Universe brand be promoted and sustained in a coordinated manner, an above-the-line agency will be appointed to promote, on a pro bono basis, the commercial look of Street Universe, and a below-the-line agency to oversee tactical events and campaigns. Media coordination will be an in-house function, as will brand guardianship.

- **FUNDRAISING**

Corporate sponsors from various industries, who are either interested in helping the street children or saving the CBD, will be sought. Government funds or resources will be sought for appropriate projects, i.e. land for the Youth Village. Various events have been launched, whilst others are in planning. A subsidiary of the Street Universe Holding Company will either fulfill the function of master licensor or enter into a licensing agreement with a master licensor in respect of the Street Universe brand. A "friends of Street Universe" campaign will promote product or financial support from the general community.

- **BUSINESS ADVISORS**

Reputable advisors have been, and will be appointed to gain business skills in line with Street Universe's desire to be run along business principles. Their performance will be subject to regular assessment by the Street Universe directors. Presently the business consultants are Johan Malherbe (Director in charge of this function) and Dale Williams (IT Director). Refer to brief resumes at end. Bobby Duffus (MD of Yithi Interactive) is the Marketing and Advertising consultant. BoE are the official banking partner (and founding sponsor), the auditors are Moores Rowland, and legal Advisors are Irish-Ashman (employment and litigation) and Delport & Ward (commercial).

- **INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (IT)**

The aim is to administer Street Universe effectively and efficiently, employing technology that will ensure the organisation remains contemporary with modern business. Our belief is that through proper use of technology to streamline our operations, we can reduce administration costs and thus pass on more benefit to the street people. A basic web site is in operation, and is in the process of being refined to become interactive and highly functional. ([www.streetuniverse.org.za](http://www.streetuniverse.org.za))

**BRIEF RESUMES****Linzi Thomas – Executive Director (Founder)**

- Marketing, advertising and events for Blush Magazine
- Marketing director "2-21" Magazine
- Director of GWRock Productions which included programming for SABC/MNET
- Started commercial and corporate division of Rapid Blue Productions (arm of MNET)
- Founded Pineapple Studios
- Production Manager at Velocity Film Company
- Line Producer at Mc Kenzie Rudolphe
- Founded Beth and Linzi Productions, facilitated and produced S.A/ Namibian leg of "The Cell" movie with Jennifer Lopez

**Paddy Upton – Managing Director**

M.Sc. (Medical) Sport Science (UCT)

- B.Sc (Human Movement Studies) Stellenbosch University
- B.Hons (Biokinetics) University of Port Elizabeth
- M.Sc. (Medical) Sport Science, University of Cape Town
- Author of 3 scientific publications in international journals
- Cricket: WP schools captain, WP U23 captain, WP B, SA Universities
- Rugby: South African Rugby Association (SARA)
- Founder member of Sports Science Promotions cc (Fitness training and management of professional sportsmen/ women)
- Full-time fitness trainer to SA Cricket Team, 1994-1998
- Full-time fitness trainer to WP Rugby Team 1999
- Author – "Beer Drinkers Guide to Losing Weight" (Penguin books, 1997)
- Sports Commentator (Radio and television)
- Written articles for over 25 sport/ health related publications

**Johan Malherbe – Non-executive Director (Business Consultant)**

BA LLB H Dip Tax

- Johan was a manager in the tax division of Arthur Andersen where he focussed on corporate tax, international tax and structured finance transactions. He left Arthur Andersen in September 1995 to become a founding shareholder of Mettle Ltd, a JSE listed merchant bank. He left Mettle during 2000 to pursue further business interests in financial services.

**Dale Williams – Non-executive Director (Business Consultant / IT)**

National Diploma in Computer Data Processing

- Dale was the vice president of AIESEC\* International (Brussels) Internal Systems (1991), and ambassador for AIESEC's International activities. He went on to found Stones Advertising Internet Company. He created the first online South African Unit Trust site (Unit Trusts South Africa). He is presently a Director at Global Technology Services (Pty) Ltd, a JSE listed IT company, where he is responsible for e-Business initiatives.

\* AIESEC (International Association of students in economics and commerce).

**Paul Finlayson – Non-executive Director (Board of Executors)**

B.Compt (Hons) CA SA

- Paul is qualified as a chartered accountant and heads up the new business division at The Board of Executors (BoE) Private bank. With BoE being Street Universe's banking partner, Paul represents them on the Street Universe board.

**Bobby Duffus – Non-executive Director (Marketing & Advertising)**

- Bobby is the managing Director of Yithi Interactive, a promotions and advertising agency, that focuses much of its' business to the informal sector. Bobby is fluent in english, afrikaans, xhosa, zulu and tswana.

from Ian  
Donald 21/01/00



street universe

## The Streetkids' Solution!

**INTRODUCTION :** This document serves to outline a working solution for the **streetkids** of South Africa, developed and inspired by the **streetkids** of Cape Town. With the help of Street Universe, a registered Section 21 Company, the authentic Voice from the Street can now be heard, and it is saying: 'HELP US TO HELP OURSELVES!'.

The Street Universe vision is to create a universe of opportunities that will enable hardened street children and youth to take responsibility in becoming constructive, self-sustainable community members. We invite all who wish to make a meaningful and real contribution to join us in making our vision a reality and to be part of a movement that is looking to positively transform our wonderful, yet troubled land

**BACKGROUND :** Street Universe's initial research period of over 2 years (11/99 - 12/01) was aimed at identifying and understanding the individual needs of the hardened street children/ youth, and to identify the structures that need to be implemented, and the changes that are required, in order for them to realise their true potential. Through a 24 hour-a-day, 7 day-a-week availability and hands-on approach, trust and respect was established with over 400 street people from the Cape Town CBD and surrounds. Participation in sport and excursions into nature were the primary activities that facilitated building relationships. We learned the street culture, came to recognize their methods of survival, and appreciate the mutual impact that the street people and their surroundings have upon each other. Accordingly, the Street Universe plans are not based on theory, but rather on invaluable, interactive hands-on experience, and/or have been uniquely developed in consultation with both the street people of Cape Town and with those affected by them.

We have consulted with experts across various fields. We network with several organisations, government structures, police, businesses and others who are affected by, impact on or who can aid and support the hardened street children/ youth. We promote and maintain an open door for interaction from all sectors of the community that are willing to positively contribute to the organisation and its' members.

# The Streetkids' Solution!

We believe in and trust the majority of the street people and know that they have both plans and intentions to realize their potential and their dreams. Their requirement from us is to create a platform for them to be seen and heard, an opportunity for them to develop their potential, and a safety net to catch them if they stumble or fall.

**ABBREVIATED MODEL :** When a child/ youth exits the broadier community and adopts a life on the street, their needs will be attended to in the Street Intervention programme. This programme immediately seeks to relocate them to a safe "home" environment. For the already street hardened, the Street Intervention programme provides a range of sporting/ recreational/ educational alternatives to street life that will enable each individual's commitment to change to be assessed. Those who show the necessary commitment will embark on a personal Transformation Process to prepare them for further rehabilitation and development in a Youth Development Eco-Village. We intend to develop eco-villages throughout South Africa and each will be situated in a natural, safe and friendly environment, away from the negative influences of street life where behavioural patterns are dominated by the instinct to survive. A self-sustainable community will provide the hardened street children/ youth with a holistic, stimulating and developmental environment, in which to deal with their past and to shape their future. The pillars of the Youth Village project will be SPORT, EDUCATION, LIFE SKILLS, VOCATIONAL SKILLS, MEDICAL and COMMUNITY INTERACTION. The Youth Village will represent a voluntary and friendly family environment, and not dormitory style institutionalisation. For graduates, the aim is to source a homely living environment, to maintain a personal support base and to source/ provide a range of vocational opportunities that will enable self-sustainable living in chosen areas within the broader community.

**BUSINESS STRUCTURE :** Street Universe is an association incorporated under section 21 (registration no. 2001/019143/08). It currently has six active and specialist directors. The Board of Executors (BoE) bank is a founding sponsor and banking partner. Ensuring absolute accountability, BoE manage all financial draw downs, which are reviewed monthly by audit firm Moores Rowland. To maximise finance for the direct benefit of the street children/ youth, all non-executive directors offer their expertise on a pro-bono basis, as do all marketing/ advertising functions, auditors, lawyers, business advisors and web site developers.

# **The Streetkids' Solution!**

**THE STREET UNIVERSE ETHOS :** Absolutely everything we do is for the (direct or indirect) benefit of the street children and youth. This is of UTMOST importance and is the defining ethos of Street Universe.

We take pride in our PROFESSIONALISM, our HONESTY and our INTEGRITY and we hold ourselves ACCOUNTABLE to our supporters and to the street people.

We recognise the need for everyone to work TOGETHER and we have zero tolerance of egos, agendas and negativity. We want to get out there and with the support of all South Africans, to MAKE IT HAPPEN for the street kids and for the broader community... and we want to have FUN while we're doing it!

**THE FUTURE :** Having laid solid foundations during the 'research period', Street Universe is entering a very exciting phase. We believe that dealing with the issue of street children is the collective responsibility of the entire community and we encourage all interested parties to get involved in a manner that is beneficial both for themselves and most importantly, for the street youth. We see ourselves as facilitators within the street universe, coordinating and facilitating the communities' involvement with the street children/youth and vice versa.

We will continue to network with all individuals and organisations that can MAKE IT HAPPEN, to prevent a duplication of services and to ensure that we are efficiently and effectively working towards the same goals. It is estimated that there will be between 2 -10 million AIDS orphans in South Africa by 2010, a large percentage of which will end up on the streets. There is no more time to mess around – NOW is the time!

We have been overwhelmed by the positive response that Street Universe has received in our attempt to find solutions where others just see problems. We have met ordinary people doing extraordinary things within our communities and we have huge faith in the future of our beautiful land..

The future will challenge us, and will force us to dig deep into our reserves, but there is no doubting our collective commitment and awesome abilities which will ensure that Cape Town (and ultimately South Africa) succeeds in finding long-term, self-perpetuating solutions for our wonderful street children and youth.



# **The Streetkids' Solution!**

**THE LAUREUS SPORT FOR GOOD FOUNDATION :** The Laureus Sport for Good Foundation (Laureus SFG) mission is to fund and promote the use of sport as a tool for social change. Its heart and soul is the World Sports Academy, a dedicated team of 42 legendary sportsmen and women; all of whom have agreed to volunteer their time to help identify appropriate projects for funding, acting as global ambassadors for the Foundation's work. The Academy also presides over the Laureus World Sports Awards, an annual ceremony held in Monaco dedicated to recognizing the power of sport to change people's lives and to honouring sporting excellence.

Sporting legends and members of the World Sports Authority: Edwin Moses, Daley Thompson, Sean Fitzpatrick and Hugo Porta will join fellow South African Academy member, Morne du Plessis, in Cape Town on the 14<sup>th</sup> January 2002 to launch the Laureus SFG Street Universe programme.

We believe that this event will provide a massive launch pad for Street Universe's vision, and that it will set the scene for what will be a momentous 2002 for Street Universe, Cape Town and the 'soon-to-be-ex'- street children!

We welcome you to join us as we move UPWARDS and ONWARDS!

# APPENDIX 5

01/12/01

Dear Cecelia

Following your email, I have addressed the four areas where you requested input. Should you require an elaboration in any of the areas, please do not hesitate to request.

Also, we really would appreciate some form of list of references for the information that you found regarding street children. Further, no, I have not seen the video "scars". Is it possible to "hire" it for some of our staff to watch?

## 1. Street Universe : A brief overview

The aim of Street Universe is to create opportunities and structures for street-hardened children or youth and the broader community; for their mutual upliftment. This will be accomplished by ensuring that each hardened child and youth currently living on the streets of the Cape Town Unicity, receives the appropriate support, opportunities and intervention that they require in order to become self-sustainable members of our community. Once established in Cape Town, the Street Universe model will be replicated in other communities throughout Africa.

Since inception (Nov. '99), Street Universe has consolidated its position through hands-on interaction and learning through personal experience. Founder, Linzi Thomas and Managing Director, Paddy Upton originate from diverse fields, and have given up successful careers in order to work full-time with the street people. Linzi is a successful film producer, having facilitated productions for amongst others, Jennifer Lopez in "The Cell". Paddy is as a Masters in Sport Science graduate who spent 4 years as the full-time fitness trainer for the South African cricket team.

The Street Universe community is specifically the people on the streets of Cape Town CBD and the immediate surrounds. The project provides a comprehensive service on a daily basis where we provide personal individualised support, outreach programmes, medical assistance, assist in disputes and generally act as a voice for people who have been alienated by society. In addition we work with the various role players in the environment that both affects and is affected by the street people. Specifically we work with other organizations in order to prevent duplication of services.

Using our comprehensive database of the children and youth, and based on the street peoples' input, our next objective is to establish an appropriate range of "transformation" processes, aimed at progressing children/ youth to a youth development village to be situated away from urban

areas. The transformation process and eco-village will provide rehabilitation from past negative experiences, away from the influences of city life, and will provide a wide variety of developmental opportunities in which to create a long-term sustainable future for each individual.

## 2. Anthropological contribution

The evolution of Street Universe has been based on experiential learning, rather than by "the text book". Accordingly, research and evaluation of the work done is imperative for both the progress of the Cape Town model, and for replicating in other centres countrywide. Accordingly, we both encourage and welcome this "academic" research and evaluation.

## 3. Difficulty in prescribing anthropological research

Street Universe operates primarily in the environment in which the hardened street children and youth live. We do not have a shelter or formal drop-in centre, and thus little structure exists in which Street Universe encounter the street children/ youth. However, recent weekly or twice-weekly sporting programmes have been established, which provide a somewhat structured environment for interaction with specific groups. It might be in these programmes that anthropological evaluation would be most meaningful.

## 4. Areas of analysis

The following are areas where there is some structured interaction with the street children/ youth;

Drumming sessions

Sailing

Surf skiing and running programme

Kayaking

Soccer matches and practices

***Realities of Organizational Communication and  
Conflict***

**(Report based on internship at Street Universe with particular  
emphasis on the importance of communication within the  
organization)**

University of Cape Town

**By Cecilia Bermúdez Horsten  
UCT Social Anthropology Department  
July 2002**

**Thank you to Street Universe's outreach team who introduced me to Cape Town's street universe and who accommodated me in their team. They:**

*"Combine the sensitivity and diagnostic understanding of good social workers, the imagination, patience and communication skills of accomplished teachers and some of the clairvoyance and managerial skills of seasoned administrators, plus a saint's faith and the tough skin of a truant officer"*

*(From Easton et al in Leonardos, 1995)*

## Introduction

It is hard to imagine many kids would be on the streets of Cape Town if:

- public assistance programs extended realistic financial support to families in need
- male violence against women and children did not exist
- the state guaranteed kids loving alternatives to dangerous homes
- schools were committed to educating and guiding those children at greatest risk of personal ruin.<sup>1</sup>

Several interventions have been put in place in the city of Cape Town in diverse attempts to reach out to the growing urban poor children and youth. Street Universe is but one of those interventions, the one I know. But people keep on asking me how effective the organization has been in coping with or reducing the plight of disadvantaged children. Many people have asked: "This Street Universe thing, is it ... good ... or all talk?" Defining effectiveness in the context of innovative projects and programmes for street kids is a rather subjective task. Reaching an understanding of effectiveness stumbles into the inherent constraints of conducting a systematic evaluation and gathering conclusive supporting evidence. Blanc (1994) in Leonardos<sup>2</sup> (1995) claims that the ideal situation would be one in which evaluation could demonstrate that more than a certain number of children and youth had changed to the desired behaviour, according to the set aims and targets. But Blanc was doubtful that change in behaviour could be attributable exclusively to a programme. Change in behaviour and attitude could, for example, be attributed to support and guidance from external programmes or individuals, or from other organizations, a church, etc. Another issue related to the concept of effectiveness of programs concerns their capacity to deal with the problem in a significant way. Dewees and Klees in Leonardos (1995:18) refer to Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) as "jewel boxes, beautifully crafted efforts that really help some children" but nevertheless do not even begin to address the magnitude of the problems NGOs are usually concerned with.

Programme results should be assessed primarily in terms of established goals and available resources. Blanc and Easton in Blanc (1995) suggest that effective projects and programmes seem to be those which besides really helping some

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<sup>1</sup> Even though there are a variety of other issues which could explain the vast number of street kids in Cape Town, these are the main issues that came up in conversations with the street kids when talking about why they were on the street.

<sup>2</sup> Leonardos, A. 1995 Effective strategies and approaches for reaching street and working children through education. UNESCO.

children, have also constantly re-oriented their field of action as a result of both self-evaluations of their practices and assessments of the children's needs. The efficiency of an organization is thus related to management's ability to receive, transmit and positively act on information.

### **Why Street Universe?**

I first heard about Street Universe in September 2002, from a friend who had considered doing her research on the organization. It was through her that I got the contact details of Linzi Thomas and Paddy Upton, then director and managing director respectively of the organization. I made all initial contact with Paddy in September 2001, who advised me to contact them two months later because the organization was going through a lot of changes. At the end of November I contacted him again, and because of the end of the year chaotic weeks, we agreed I would start the internship at Street Universe on the 14<sup>th</sup> of January 2002.

### **Why evaluation?**

When I spoke with Paddy the second time, in November, I asked him for a brief and explained the context of the internship: that I was a Masters student in Practical Anthropology at the University of Cape Town, and that as part of the requirements for completing the Masters degree, I needed to do a 6-week internship with a Non-Governmental Organization leading to a minor dissertation, based on the report written for the internship. I told him I knew very little about the organization and he agreed to send me a brief. The main things he told me concerning the internship were that 1) my report and dissertation should be useful for the street kids in the long run, and not "a piece of academic writing that would gather dust in some library on one of their shelves" and 2) that he would like me to look at the organization from within because every time they got an intern or a volunteer they sent them to the streets and they ended up forgetting about themselves inside the office. He would like me to do my internship on organizational matters but said he would send me a brief after giving it some thought. In an e-mail of 18<sup>th</sup> December 2001 he noted that "*research and evaluation of the work done is imperative for both the progress of the Cape Town model, and for replicating in other centres countrywide*". He suggested that anthropological evaluation would be most meaningful in the drumming or sporting programmes.

## Staff Structure

At the time that I started the internship, Street Universe's permanent staff structure was as follows:

<i>Linzi Thomas</i>	founder and director	(based in head office)
<i>Paddy Upton</i>	managing director	(based in head office)
<i>Faizel Petersen</i>	administration and finance	(based in head office)
<i>Ian Macdonald</i>	marketing co-ordinator	(based in head office)
<i>Clifford (Cliffy) Martinus</i>	outreach manager	
<i>Noel Solomons</i>	music outreach co-ordinator	
<i>Luke Baker</i>	sports outreach co-ordinator	
<i>Harriet Abrahams</i>	outreach worker (former Cape Town street kid)	
<i>Achmat (Aggies) Philander</i>	outreach worker (former Cape Town street kid)	
<i>Shaun (Ghost) Geswind</i>	outreach worker (former Cape Town street kid)	

Added to the personnel there were when I started five full-time volunteers (Fiona, Christy, Linda, Malaika and Mark) and two full-time interns (Babette and me). By my last week as an intern at Street Universe, we were three full-time volunteers (Linda, Malaika and Mark) and three full-time interns (Kathrin, Susanne and me). Throughout the internship I noticed a dozen of volunteers who showed interest and joined the team for a couple of days but who discontinued their engagement with Street Universe because they got frustrated with the inner workings of the organization.

## First Steps

The day I was supposed to start at Street Universe, Paddy told me they were all very busy because the Laureus Foundation<sup>3</sup> was in Cape Town, and asked me if I could start the following week. That is when I first learned that Street Universe had been formally selected by the World Sports Academy as the South African beneficiary of this year's significant funding. I started my internship on the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 2002. Still no brief had been given to me after Paddy explained the "difficulty in prescribing anthropological research" because "little structure exists in which Street Universe encounters the street children/youth". However, he suggested I evaluate the drumming program which had recently begun and which he was excited about because it had been

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<sup>3</sup> The Laureus Foundation is a charitable venture in partnership with the World Sports Academy, that funds and promotes the use of sports as a tool for social change. Street Universe was chosen as one of the 10 beneficiaries around the world for 2002.



welcomed with great enthusiasm from the street kids. Paddy referred me to Noel Solomons, the person supervising the music programme.

### **Drumming Programme**

Noel gave me the impression that there was not much evaluation to do regarding the drumming, but said "check it out and see what you think about it". Street Universe had approached an organization called Red Zebra to co-ordinate and carry forward the drumming programme. Red Zebra is an organization that specialises in improving people's ability to communicate through music workshops. Mark, from Red Zebra, taught the drumming, and with the help of staff, volunteers and street kids, brought a variety of drums and percussion items to the drumming session. I attended four drumming sessions, which took place on a corner of Buitengracht Street on a grassy patch. The sessions were not tightly organized. Kids arrived from right and left, but no attendance lists were kept and after each session, the group of kids split and back to the office we went with the drums. With Street Universe's marketing objective in mind, namely to improve the community's perception of street kids by not wanting to convey a message of the kids as being destitute, poor and without hope, "but rather one of what these kids could attain if given the right structure and opportunities", I thought the drumming programme was a brilliant idea. Mark, the instructor, was very enthusiastic throughout the sessions and the kids seemed to thoroughly enjoy drumming away their stress and tensions. The first sessions were full of laughter and kids would come running to drum. There would be between 15 and 30 kids in a session.

For two weeks the programme seemed to go smoothly, and yet I noticed the kids' enthusiasm was fading. The novelty had worn off and the regularity of the drumming programme seemed to be falling apart.

- fewer and fewer kids were attending the drumming sessions, as they were losing interest and felt at times used by the organization for their own means when they were asked to play at a certain venue and yet felt alienated from the process. For example the kids felt they did not have a say concerning the money raised at events where they performed and each individual wanted some of that money.
- it was more and more difficult to attract the kids to join the drumming programme. Mark asked Noel and the volunteers to make sure there was a group of kids ready twice a week for each two-hour drumming session. I talked to some younger boys who were sitting outside the outreach office, on Bree Street, next to Community Chest about it, and they were very negative about the programme: "They want us

to drum and drum but there is no food, and I'm hungry. I don't want to drum". Their body language was filled with anger, and one even pushed me away when I mentioned the drumming.

This was a first indication of miscommunication of aims and intentions of drumming programme. The programme was intended to benefit the kids, however, they saw no advantage in participating regularly.

### **Reflections on Communication and Organizational Behaviour**

At the time, I was unaware of what was going on within the organization, and it was after reflecting upon earlier conversations with Paddy that the topic for the report was changed. I aired my views with Clifford Martinus (Cliffy), outreach manager of the organization and suggested four different topics that I thought it would be useful - for the organization - to explore: a) to look at networks, co-ordinations and interactions with other organizations that work with street people, b) follow court appearances and their ramifications closely and follow up on the court cases, c) register attendances of kids at outreach office and various programs, and follow up on a number of regular attendances, and d) communication within the organization, i.e. what is and what is not talked about, communication channels and structures, etc. Because of the short duration of the internship, namely six weeks, together with Cliffy, I decided to focus on communication as my main interest and concern. I thought that understanding communication flows would result in a more accurate understanding of the organizational behaviour than would simply examining some of the structural arrangements. From what I had understood, talking to staff and kids who regularly visited the office and having gotten a sense of the organization, I noticed some difficulties concerning communication flows. I assumed there was a need to understand the organizational behaviour in order to:

- increase efficiency in carrying out activities
- clear misunderstandings regarding allocation of responsibilities
- minimize interpersonal tensions or conflicts regarding daily duties
- better clarify aims and expectations in advance, so fewer tensions arise

That communication was not flowing clearly occurred to me when I enquired about Paddy, who had been my initial contact regarding the internship because I needed to talk to him and was first told by a staff member that he was on leave. I waited a week and asked somebody else at the office, and was told he was sick. The same day I was

told by the same staff member that Paddy had been suspended, and a week later, I read in a report to “staff, volunteers and friends of Street Universe”, that Paddy had resigned. At the time I could not understand why, but later came to the understanding that he had resigned because of power conflicts and severe disagreements with Linzi, the founder and then director. At the outreach office, I often heard about the problems of “the Linzis and Paddys”, but no feedback was given to volunteers, interns and some staff members.

### **Some Communications Problems Identified**

- staff members often complained to me about never being informed about what was going on in the management as staff were not communicating with each other
- one told me he felt he was not being treated as staff because he had no feedback on regular meetings at the head office
- volunteers and interns also regularly expressed their frustrations as they felt a lot of things were disorganised, activities were irregular, time was being wasted but they were not being informed about what was going on at Street Universe
- I felt that as each day passed, there was less and less structure in the work of the organization, e.g. programmes were cancelled, re-arranged or postponed, no camp follow-ups took place, and promises were made to kids and not kept
- some staff members had less and less hope about the future of the organization and questioned whether there was a future for the organization. Some were convinced there was no future and that resources were being wasted.

### **Consequences of Communication Flaws**

There were now a variety of issues that intrigued me regarding ‘communication’ at Street Universe:

- first and foremost the ‘disappearance’ of Paddy
- the inconsistency and irregularities of the drumming programme. There were at first regular drumming times twice a week. After two weeks, the times were changed repeatedly and soon the sessions were being postponed. After six weeks of the drumming being on and off, Mark got frustrated with Street Universe (as well as Street Universe being frustrated with him) and stopped the co-ordination of the programme.
- appointments that were not kept within outreach office, causing frustration amongst street people and visitors, such as new volunteers. Over the six-week period, there

were at least twice a week, complaints about appointments not being kept or forgotten.

- the opening hours of outreach office, that is, doors locked when supposed to be open and no staff available whole mornings or afternoons. Every week kids complained about the doors being locked at noon when it was the time when doors officially opened for them, especially if it was Monday or Friday when it was “video day”. They would yell, shout, complain, bang on the doors and cause a commotion to the big annoyance of neighbouring businesses.
- no feedback from exclusive staff meetings, causing tension and mistrust amongst some staff and volunteers/interns.
- lack of team-building efforts
- secrecy among staff, causing some to feel deprived of ‘privileged’ information

At times I felt strongly that I was not supposed to know what was going on within the organization, and I felt discomfort when I asked certain staff members. But I wanted to make them understand that I was more than a volunteer, I needed them to know it was important for me, in order to understand what I was doing at Street Universe. It became apparent that Paddy, with whom I had made initial contact, had not discussed my internship with anyone, and that is why nobody really knew why I was there. In fact, at the last week of my internship, Linzi had phoned at outreach office, and I answered. She was looking for somebody else, but she chatted to me first. She said she would like to talk to me, about what I am up to because she would like me to get involved in another organization that works with street kids, and she asked me to go and volunteer to do night shifts at the Clarrie Center in Claremont, a shelter for street boys. One of the outreach staff felt embarrassed by this as I had now been in Street Universe for seven weeks without the director knowing they had a full-time intern and he was at the same time angry that this particular dangerous assignment had been suggested to a female intern. This was more than a mere communication lapse. It was insensitive, naive and inappropriate.

### **Rumours and Assumptions**

The 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2002, Braam Malherbe, the newly assigned managing director called a meeting for all staff and volunteers to talk about the present and future situation of Street Universe. Present was also a ‘business consultant’, called in to help Street Universe become a more efficient organization. Amongst other things, Braam spoke about the importance of communication and the importance of team building. I asked whether this kind of meeting could be held more regularly, for example, on a monthly

basis. The business consultant agreed that it was important that the communication channels be kept open and regular and that everybody was happy and knew what was going on, because it was one thing hearing something from informal conversations (namely gossip, assumptions and rumours) and another to hear it "from the horse's mouth". Everybody was present at the meeting, including Linzi, the then director. Three months later no similar meetings had been held. In the meantime, Linzi has resigned. I heard it informally by one staff member and one volunteer telling me "Did you know..." and "You know what?...". Another example of gossip, rumours and assumptions recurred when the drumming programme silently died out. For four weeks it was there, and then one day it was gone. Was it because of internal conflicts within management? Financial disagreements between instructor and organization? Personality clashes? These were the questions some staff members, interns and volunteers asked themselves but nobody was ready and confident enough to bring the doubts to an open forum. At the same staff meeting of 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2002, Braam rightly touched on the disruptive nature of damaging rumours, which, are inevitably deeply ingrained in organizational life. A lot of the information that goes around within the organization is based on assumptions:

- assumptions and rumours can be troublesome, create doubts and often a negative work environment and lead to anxieties or fears and incertitude of staff: what is true? what don't I know and why?, etc.
- therefore efficient adequate information is very important. In this respect, managers or leaders within the team should keep rumours and assumptions from disrupting organizational activities.
- rumours are difficult to correct when the information becomes publicly accepted
- however, some rumours can have a positive outcome, for example in the case where wishes and hopes are expressed by those who circulate rumours. Solutions to work problems can be a result of staff verbally expressing desire for change. Even though the tone is negative, these kinds of rumours still represent staff concerns.

### **Marketing an Image or Self Delusion?**

It was at times very awkward for me and other volunteers/interns, when a visitor or new volunteer came, to have to explain about regular programmes and projects, when we could see most of them had ruptures and were losing structure:

- drumming sessions were constantly being cancelled or postponed

- allocated times for 'medication'<sup>4</sup> (mostly cleaning wounds and changing bandages) were irregular
- the surf-skiing programme was postponed until further notice
- court attendances were written in the quarterly planner, yet there were no reports or regular follow-ups
- 'streetwalking'<sup>5</sup> became a late morning coffee shop routine for volunteers and some permanent staff. No time was allocated for formal feedback on streetwalking.

Volunteers found themselves reciting to newcomers weekly programmes drawn on a board by volunteers or interns (asked by Cliffy, the outreach manager) within a quarterly planner: "Monday we have drumming, Tuesdays we have soccer, Wednesday we have kayaking", etc. and minutes later commenting on the ridicule of the situation. We all knew that an image was being sold of Street Universe which was not the day-to-day reality. I understood that not everybody was supposed to be equally informed about the current situation of Street Universe, and that certain information was irrelevant for certain staff and volunteers, such as financial and administrative information. However, I think it is of utmost importance that communication channels do not break down and that all staff members and volunteers/interns are informed of any relevant organizational changes, such as discontinuing programmes and formal/informal changes in staff. If volunteers/interns are expected to inform and explain what Street Universe is about to new volunteers/interns or other visitors (journalists, tourists, etc.) it would be appropriate that they be briefed regularly in order to avoid self-delusion.

### **Interpersonal Communication**

Interpersonal communication is contextual, in other words it does not happen in isolation. People come from different backgrounds, have different capabilities for learning, different levels of education, different attitudes, beliefs and aspiration levels. Of relevance when talking about any kind of communication, is:

- *psychological context*<sup>6</sup>, which is who you are and what you bring to the interaction. Your needs, desires, values, personality, etc. It was in this context that I often

<sup>4</sup> A term used for medical treatments, from treating stab wounds to giving painkillers.

<sup>5</sup> 'Streetwalking' ideally took place at 9.30 in the morning and refers to walking through some of the streets of the city centre, interacting with the kids, informing them on changes in programmes or daily events and documenting relevant information.

<sup>6</sup> From *Four Principles of Interpersonal Communication* in [www.soapboxorations.com](http://www.soapboxorations.com) (accessed 4<sup>th</sup> of March 2002)

noticed some misunderstanding between volunteers/interns, staff and street kids, for example when intervening in a conflict, or when assessing a situation. Once a conflict arose between a staff member and a volunteer when they clashed on different ways of handling a situation. In this instance Cliffy, the outreach manager, took both individuals to the side and explained to them that people can have different ideas of resolving a conflict and that it does not necessarily mean that one is wrong. He explained to the staff member that the volunteer was his work colleague and that as such she should be respected and he should co-work on solving the conflict, not push the volunteer to the side. Other times volunteers acted upon emotion and feelings, when inappropriate according to Cliffy who would then intervene by shedding light on the given situation.

- *situational context*, which deals with the psycho-social 'where' you are communicating. An interaction that takes place in a meeting or at the office, will be different from one that takes place in a bar. This context is important, as the kids interaction with staff and volunteers/interns would at times be radically different depending on the place. For example some kids would be more aggressive and 'in your face' when the office was out of sight and would soften up the minute you mentioned Street Universe. At other times I witnessed how the younger kids became openly affectionate and playful with staff and volunteers/interns in the presence of police. It suggests to me it is important for some of them to show their 'enemy' (law enforcement) that they too are humans and need care and love – if at times manipulatively!
- *cultural context*, which includes all the learned behaviours, e.g. eye contact, body language, tone of voice, etc., for example what I referred to earlier in the case of the volunteer who experienced a "culture shock".

But interpersonal communication is complicated in general. If communication can fail, it will, and if a message can be understood in different ways, it will be understood in just that way which does the most harm. Then there is often somebody who knows better than you do what you meant by your message. This reminds us of the difficulty of accurate communication, not least when every day you are dealing with people who are under the influence of alcohol, glue, thinners and drugs most of the time.

### **Examples of Good Communication: Consistent availability**

In the midst of all the confusion and almost disillusion of staff and volunteers/interns, I realized that while the street kids share a universe of invisible rights, and scarred emotions, which the social system caused, exacerbated and even at the best of times

failed to heal; Street Universe was providing healing, opportunities and a platform for communication between the kids and the rest of society. When in need of advice, comfort, encouragement, a helping hand or a listening ear, many kids knew they could approach Street Universe staff, specifically the outreach staff. I started to understand how, as an outreach agency, Street Universe had positioned itself for maximum contact with minimum discomfort for the kids, despite the organizational changes that were occurring. I observed how kids can feel empowered by caring adults who help them bridge the chasm between hostile and healing worlds. One could see how many kids had an open and honest relationship with particular members of the outreach staff. For example, there were two young boys, at the time living in the Clarrie Center in Claremont, who would come to the city by train to visit the outreach office. I had seen them and asked a staff member why they were in town and not at the shelter in Claremont and with a broad smile he told me that the boys had "just come to visit us". The Cape Town street children and youth that I had encountered since my involvement with Street Universe showed that they need people willing to act as stepping stones, to get close, invest a lot, risk a lot, at times endure a lot of abuse, and still be there. The outreach staff, whom I was working with, tried to be constant in their attention to the calls of the kids, despite ruptures in communication channels and the structures of the organization.

### **Recommendations**

After finishing my required full-time internship, but staying on at the organization on a part-time, volunteer basis, I realized that the realities of power, politics and communication changed with the rapid growth and change of Street Universe. I have in no way attempted to put forth a full evaluation of the organization. However, from my observations and conversations, five key points for the organization that have been overshadowed by organizational and managerial problems are:

- *poor communication between head office and outreach staff.* Regular meetings, for example, on a monthly basis, should take place, providing a platform for all staff and volunteers to express opinions on work progress, working environment, etc. A formal regular Street Universe newsletter could help. However this would entail additional work, time and resources for an organization that is short of staff and where the staff is overworked. Additionally, I think it is important that outreach office sets a time once a week where staff and volunteers can report back on the week's events, raise problems and discuss future plans. Developing and supporting mechanisms of feedback involve far more than following up on informal



communications. Rather, to be effective, feedback needs to be engaging, responsive and directed towards a commonly desired outcome.

- *overly centralized leadership style.* Outreach staff should be empowered to make decisions and they should be recognized as key players as they are the foot soldiers of the organization. Also, recognition should be dispersed, for example when the organization features in the media, outreach staff should receive due recognition for their role. It has created frustration amongst outreach staff and street kids when staffs from head office have been overly interested in their presence in the media (for example, *Third Degree* on E-Tv, *YOU* magazine, *Femina*, etc.)
- *lack of well-developed systems for evaluation and staff training.* Staff training and development is considered to be a crucial element of the effectiveness of organizations. Providing training opportunities and professional backup for personnel should be actively pursued. Untrained staff should for example have an introductory course on street education. Evaluation of all staff should be consistent and done on a regular basis. Working with street children and youth is physically and psychologically taxing and requires that frontline staff receive ongoing support and technical training.
- *insufficient co-ordination of efforts with other NGOs working in the same field.* Street Universe needs to liaise more with other organizations and shelters and develop some common strategies, re-define their respective roles and responsibilities in a major co-operative effort as part of a long term change process in which the street kids will be the ultimate beneficiaries. This would avoid overlapping of coverage and efforts, thereby seeking more comprehensive strategies and avoiding competitive interests.
- *co-ordination of interns and volunteers.* Structures should be put in place to provide some kind of programmes or routine work for volunteers and interns. That is, it should be clear to everyone what volunteers/interns can/cannot do and someone should be responsible for supervising that. It would benefit the organization for all staff to be informed about arrivals of new volunteers and staff. A staff member should be given the responsibility of briefing them and informing them about the current state of and changes in the organization.



**STAYING CLEAN:** Edward Campher has survived life on the streets without using drugs or alcohol. *Picture: KARIN RETIEF*

## Kids take their cue from Big Brother

**GUSTAV THIEL**

TEN Cape Town children and young adults will be soon be following in the footsteps of *Big Brother* – but with a much more worthwhile purpose than the popular reality TV show.

The aim of the project being launched later this month is to find a long-term solution for homelessness in Cape Town and to counter the lack of co-ordination which has plagued efforts to address the problem so far.

The project, Shoot for the Stars, will use 10 street children and young adults and equip them with the skills necessary to find a better life for themselves and others.

Sifiso Jezile, 21, who has been chosen as a future leader, said: "I have been on the streets and the problem is that a lot of people working to help us don't really understand the youth.

"At the moment only 15% of kids who go to shelters stay off the streets because they just want a roof over their head, but we must change the way kids think so that they can believe in the future again."

The street people will live in a house in the style of the *Big Brother* series in another project called the Little Brother House and will be filmed constantly.

"But what happens in our house will deal with very real problems and I am sure all people in this country will learn from us," Jezile added.

Shoot for the Stars was conceived by Linzi Thomas, who started Street Universe in Cape Town in 1999.

Under her guidance, Street Universe developed into one of the most successful international models to cope with homelessness and she was named Cape Times Woman of Worth in 2001 for her efforts.

Her philosophy is simple: "It is the children who made my life so much richer and I ended up learning about love and life from them, which made me realise we should listen to them for ideas about finding solutions."

Thomas spent 15 months from November 1999 to learn the street culture and its methods of survival.

The aim was to develop long-term sustainable eco-villages or farms

where children could learn about life away from the negative influences of the street.

Early last year, Thomas resigned from Street Universe and she has never spoken publicly about the circumstances.

"The children understand what needs to be done, but Street Universe was slowly taken over by people who wanted to impose their ideas on the process," she said.

A series of death threats and the prospect of being locked in long-term legal battles to retain her vision convinced Thomas to leave the organisation that she started.

Ian McDonald, spokesman for Street Universe, said the long-term strategy is still to develop eco-villages "but this is not something that we have set up".

Jonathan Khundayi, who lives in Pepper Street with seven other people, said Street Universe made a mistake in relocating its offices to Woodstock.

"Now it is difficult for us to get there and they don't know so much what is happening on the streets. I trust Linzi in what she is doing because she knows that the people living here have answers," he said.

Jezile added that Shoot for the Stars was a big step forward in the search for a sustainable solution.

The Art of Living Foundation, an international organisation aimed at enhancing spiritual well-being through health, hygiene, homes, harmony and human values, has been chosen by the youths to assist in the process.

Thomas has already raised enough money from a British company and has elicited support from models and sport stars for the early phases of the project, but the children will raise funds by selling the documentary of their experiences in the Little Brother House.

"The process is based on goal setting and understanding, which will lead the children from the streets into a long-term and self-sustainable lifestyle filled with love, compassion and a community spirit," said Thomas.